CRUEL EDEN

TIM HAINES

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CONFIDENTIAL

Extract from a letter from Captain Edward Malone (1st Battalion London Irish Rifles) addressed to Lord John Roxton (Albany) and recovered from his possessions after the assault on Bois de Fourcaux September 1916. Transcribed 14th October - EC

12th 1.00am

Zero is 06.20. I dreamt of the plateau again last night. It was so vivid; I could almost smell the frangipan. I was back in the summer of '12 walking amongst the tree ferns and gingkos. Woke up to the stench of trench foot and corpses. The splintered stumps around me mocking my dreams. The oddest thing, I even thought I heard the primeval chorus of those creatures after I awoke. Recently, I have even begun to doubt my own memories. Maybe I am going mad - maybe I just imagined a world of such vivid colour and fantastical monsters to escape these dismal trenches… Do you know if anyone else has gone back there? Surely there has been some attempt to find out what happened to Professor Challenger? Promise me you won't let the world forget. Don't let the plateau become lost - not again.

Note; all of Cpt Malone's correspondence to Lord Roxton was intercepted and is available in Government File 14458.

CHAPTER ONE

THE SOMME, SEPTEMBER 15th 1916

For three months, allied troops had thrown themselves at the German trenches in High Wood with little success. The machines of war had driven Nature from the place. Soil boiled, tree stumps shattered and men bled into stagnant pools. The whole hill had become one giant muddy tomb. As the cold autumnal sun was beginning to rise yet again men ran, stumbled and crawled across the jagged no-man's land. Maxim's steamed in defence. Mud spat and kicked at the desperate attackers as bullets scythed through their numbers. However, this time, one-by-one men fell and tumbled into the German trenches.

Two exhausted soldiers from the London Irish slumped into the bottom of a deep trench behind a German machine gun, its position recently torn apart by a mortar round. Bodies of the defenders lay crumpled beside it. None moved.

'Jesus, Jesus, Jesus!' cried one, a slight 18-year-old.

'Bloody'ell!' replied his older friend. 'You's hit, 'arry?'

'Jesus, Jesus, Jesus!' was Harry's only response.

'Did you see that damn tank! Useless. It actually shot at us. Our own sodding tank!'

‘Jesus, Jesus!’

‘The Londons are getting slaughtered.’

‘Jesus, Jack! I mean Jesus Christ!’

Jack leant forward and held Harry’s shoulders looking him in the eye. ‘Calm, lad. Calm. You done good.’

The noise of war seemed a little more distant at the bottom of the trench. For a moment, as a sickly mix of mist and sulphurous smoke swirled round them, they felt safe from the horror above. Harry relaxed a little.

‘Jeeeez … h-how did we survive that?’ he said.

Jack leant back against the parapet and started reloading his Lee. ‘Luck. S’all. Mortars seem to have killed all the Hun here. Once that machine gun nest blew, it just ...’

From nowhere a man dropped on to the duckboards beside them. Jack raised his bayonet ready for a fight but then relaxed.

Captain Edward Malone got up off his knees and smiled. ‘All right?’ He was a tall athletic man with ginger hair and pale complexion. Jack knew him immediately. The Captain had made something of a name for himself among the London Irish for his courage - but was perhaps better known as a dangerous and reckless leader who all too frequently got those around him killed. As he stood, Jack noticed he was holding a bayonet and his face and arms were soaked in blood that was not his.

‘Game is on, lads. Did you hear it?’ Malone asked excitedly. Then he let out a long animal like screech.

Jack and Harry looked at each other bewildered. ‘Beg yer pardon, Captain?’

They were all agitated but the Captain seemed close to losing his senses. ‘Bit like a giant parrot. Come on you must have heard it? I

know it's near.'

Harry tapped his temple while Jack struggled to shape a response:

'Seems Jerry's all dead here, Sir. But sure as eggs they'll be back.'

Malone did not seem to listen. He threw down the bayonet and pulled his revolver out to check the rounds. Then he produced a second from behind his back and held them both up.

'Right, let's explore. You with me boys?'

'Jack?' whispered Harry. 'What's he talking about?'

Again Jack tried to get some sense out of the Captain. 'Sir, what exactly is your plan? Shouldn't we prepare for a counter attack?'

Malone sniffed the air and then let out a strange whoop. 'I can smell them too. Can't you? Haven't smelt that rancid perfume for a good few years. I knew those slippery bastards would find it.'

Suddenly he focussed intently on the two men. 'You are coming with me. We are going on a monster hunt!'

Malone turned and strode off down the trench. Soon he disappeared into the mist. 'Come on!' came a shout from beyond the vale.

Jack looked at Harry and shrugged. 'S'norder, I suppose. Even if he is barking.'

Reluctantly the two men stepped over the German corpses and hurried after the Captain. The trench was seven to eight feet deep and three or four men wide in parts. It twisted to the left and then cut sharp right where they stumbled on Malone again. He was standing very still.

He held up his hand for Harry and Jack to stop. The mist seemed thicker here but a sharp left turn was just visible ahead. Still there was no sign of any German counter attack.

Malone bent down and pulled something out from between the duckboards. It was a severed foot. Not an unusual sight in these trenches but this one seemed to be covered in a thick mucus. He studied it closely and sniffed it. Harry retched.

'Right, Sir. I think we need to go back and set-up a muster point,' said Jack.

'It's close,' was the response. 'The stench is strong. Hear that?'

Jack listened and this time he did hear something, a deep gurgling noise coming from just round the next turn. It seemed to rise and fall like waves on a beach

'What is that?'

'That, Private Turner, is my nightmares come back to haunt me. That is the past I fled which now I must face.'

Malone raised his pistols and walked steadily to the turn in the trench. Jack could see his hands were shaking. He reached the corner and froze. Whatever he was looking at was obscured from Jack. Malone looked confused. Gradually he dropped his arms and turned his head slightly as if studying something lying on the ground ahead of him.

'What's it, Captain?'

From somewhere ahead the gurgling turned into a deep chesty cough. It was followed by a click and a hiss.

Malone swung round and screamed at Jack. 'Run!'

At that instant, a massive explosion ripped a 30-yard hole in the middle of the German Switch Line.

* * * * * * * *

From a large concrete sentry post in the reserve trenches Baron Otto Richter watched a plume of mud and shattered branches rise

through the mist two hundred yards ahead. His vantage point gave him a clear view of the German defences dominated by the smouldering crest of High Wood.

The little demonstration had not gone to plan. Sighing he looked down and noticed his tailored powder-blue coat was smeared with soot where his large stomach had been leaning on the parapet. In the same moment, a light morning breeze carried the stench of rotting corpses down from the hill - he loathed these visits to the Front.

Quickly he muttered to the orderly next to him. 'Get a clear up crew in there immediately before the British reach that trench. They cannot find anything. Do you understand? Absolutely nothing.'

Then he straightened up and turned to the assembled officials crammed into the concrete space behind him. 'Thank you, for your time,' he announced clapping his hands. 'I think we can all agree this has been a most informative preliminary demonstration.'

There was a muted response from the group and Richter noticed several had already slipped out.

Then an ensign appeared at the door and shouted. 'They've reached the communication trenches. The wood is lost!'

There was an unseemly rush for the door as half a dozen officers and their assistants all attempted to exit at once. Richter felt a well of panic and started hastily packing a large wooden trunk full of electronic equipment.

'Can I suggest you leave now, Sir?' came a voice right on his shoulder. Richter jumped and dropped a delicate valve on the ground.

'Captain!' he exclaimed. 'Where did you come from? Look what you made me do. The cost of that will come out of your wages.'

Richter loathed Captain Kurt Von Heket. He was his second in command at the Imperial Biowaffen Unit but sometimes he caught him acting like he was the one in charge. As always he was immaculately turned out. His thick black hair perfectly cut, his red Biowaffen uniform spotless and his face wore the same smile that never reached the rest of his face.

'As you wish, Sir. But let us now go.'

'Don't be stupid Captain. We cannot leave this transmission equipment here. If it fell into enemy hands it would be a disaster. Help me move it!'

Von Heket leant forward and looked out of the concrete observation window across the myriad of trenches leading up to High Wood.

'I estimate we have no more than four or five minutes before we have to fight our way out of here, Baron. I took the precaution of bringing a box of incendiaries. If we leave right now we have a chance. By the time the British arrive, it will be about 2000 degrees in here.'

Richter gave his smart box of equipment a half-hearted tug and attempted to assert himself.

'Did you see the demonstration, Captain?' he said. 'I thought our subject performed remarkably well under the circumstances. Had we not lost transmission, I feel sure it would have torn into the enemy.'

For a moment Von Heket seemed lost for words. When he did talk he did so very slowly as if talking to a child. 'I did emphasize the species you chose …'

'Yes. Such a magnificent specimen. You could see how impressed the delegation was.'

'… was a scavenger not a predator. That hill is nothing but a pile of mud and corpses. It collapsed from indigestion before it even got to the enemy.'

‘But the neural clamp …’

Despite his best efforts Von Heket’s patience snapped. ‘We will fully report to you on the results of this field trial when we get back to the facility.’ Without consulting the baron he turned round and prepped the incendiary device.

‘Right, I look forward to it,’ replied Richter straightening his mud-stained coat. ‘Set the incendiaries and I will see you in the car.

CHAPTER TWO

EIGHTEEN MONTHS LATER

Milly Summerlee closed the bedroom door slowly until she heard the heavy brass latch click into place. She paused and let her forehead rest on its cold, smooth surface. She had nursed many men in the last two years, seen many die, but this time it was different. It was her father. She listened one final time to make sure he was asleep and then set off quietly down the stairs.

As she moved across the hall and into the living room she wound her hair into a bun. A fire had been set and Simpson, her father’s butler, had left a glass of sherry on the mantelpiece. It was not her sort of drink but, since it was the only alcohol her father had in the house, she was not about to be fussy. She emptied the glass in one gulp and winced at the taste. Still, she felt another would help, so she pulled the silk rope cord next to the fireplace and waited for Simpson to appear.

The living room was large and full of rich colours. Dark green floral patterns covered the walls. The deep red velvet sofas sat on thick Turkish rugs and gold-framed paintings and mirrors hung everywhere. Her father, Professor Leo Summerlee, was a great man, famous for his academic work on fossil ammonites and a curator at the Natural History Museum. So no expense had been spared when he bought this spacious Victorian villa in Maida Vale and Milly knew

why. Ever since her mother died he had used his wealth to buy her beautiful things. Every object had an 'interesting' story of scientific or historical importance. He hoped these would make them more special to her but they did not. A pair of old gloves that she kept hidden in her draw upstairs was worth more to her than everything he had purchased because they belonged to her mother. She understood he had tried and was grateful, but he could neither express himself emotionally nor understand how she felt. And all the time the memory of the love in her mother's eyes and touch of her soft hands made his cold dusty world of facts seem less and less attractive. A gulf between them had grown, which neither was capable of bridging.

Now he lay upstairs dying and all she could do was hold his hand. She didn't know what to say and felt guilty she didn't care more.

In front of her the tall ground-floor windows looked out on to Warrington Crescent and, in pride of place, positioned to get the maximum sun, was an ugly looking plant, like a giant pineapple. It gave the room an earthy, damp smell. Her father had grown it from a seed he brought back from his expedition to Amazonia. He never tired of telling people how it was a 'lonely female bennettite' that would stay that way until someone went back to find a male - another one of his 'stories'.

For a moment Milly just stood looking out of the window at the Crescent, trying to empty her mind of the afternoon spent listening to her father's pain. The gentle yellow glow of the streetlights lit the porticoes and balconies of her affluent neighbourhood. There, in the middle window, was a ghostly reflection of herself: a tall thin figure with long dark hair and large blue eyes. For a while she just stared, detaching herself and judging the figure before her. At any moment, she half expected it to turn and walk away.

She shivered and drew in a deep breath - Simpson was slow tonight. She pulled a leaf off the bennettite and threw it in the fire. She

hated waiting, could not stand queues, yet that is all she did now from day to day, wait for her father to die.

Simpson, appeared at the door in a rush. 'I apologise for the delay, Ms Summerlee. If you will excuse me.' He strode across the room and started to close the shutters in the bay window.

'What's the matter? I'm not sure I want the shutters closed.'

'Just a precaution, ma'am. You may have heard the maroon a moment ago, so I decided to go up to the roof and take a look. There were about five or six of them, big 'uns too. Giants, I think, and I fancied they were heading this way. How is the Professor?'

'Sleeping at last, thank you. I gave him enough morphine to knock out an elephant. Fancy another sherry or two might do it for me.'

Simpson pulled the metal bar over to lock the shutters. He had worked for the Professor for over a year now after being invalided out of the army. He was a tall, hard-looking man with a shaved head and several scars. In fact, he did not look like a butler at all, but he was efficient and did everything to make nursing the professor as easy as possible. Despite this, Milly was not entirely sure she trusted him.

'I have heard these new Staaken's can carry one tonne bombs,' he said. 'Those boys could flatten a neighbourhood.'

'As long as it doesn't wake Papa,' she said, waving her empty glass.

As he went to refill it she shouted after him. 'I am thinking of going back to Mary's next month. Papa is stable most of the time and I can do the evenings'

When Simpson returned with a full glass she added 'They are so short of nurses and half the time he doesn't even know it's me.'

'As you wish ma'am. I will make arrangements for someone else to sit with him. Will there be anything else?'

She took a swig. ‘What’s the time?’

‘Almost midnight. I let Dr Challenger know you were with your father and unable to join him at the theatre.’

‘I can’t say I’m that sad – some ghastly revue at the Hippodrome. He said it would help cheer me up.’

‘He mentioned he might call round later, after he had finished preparing his speech.’

She sat down heavily in an armchair. ‘Oh, that *blasted* speech. He keeps talking to father about it …’

At that moment Milly noticed the sherry rise up out of her glass. Her whole body felt like it was being pressed against the chair and the air was squeezed out of her chest. In a silence her father’s bennettite sailed past her and she realised she was staring at the ceiling, where the chandelier was rocking violently back and forth. For a second she lay still, trying to make sense of what had just happened. Then the world came crashing back in on her and she gasped to draw air back into her lungs.

There had been an explosion but she felt calm. She wiggled her hands and feet to check for damage and then slowly rolled out of the toppled armchair.

By the window Simpson was also getting to his feet. Outside she could hear glass and metal falling in the street. Inside, pictures, furniture and loose objects had been rearranged, but the shutters were still in place, if a bit bent.

Milly shook her head and then, for reasons she could not explain, started laughing. ‘What the hell just happened!’

Simpson didn’t reply but hurried into the hall where she heard him pulling open the front door. He let out a low whistle.

Milly followed him out.

Moments before Warrington Crescent had been a picture of tranquil urban life - now it was chaos. Debris littered the road and, for as far as the eye could see, windows were smashed in every house. About a hundred yards down the street, on the opposite side to her, flames crackled and roared amongst the ruins of several houses. Half a dozen people stood in the street dazed and covered in dust. Above the noise of falling masonry, Milly could hear screams.

'I must do something,' said Milly.

Simpson took her arm firmly. 'Forgive me ma'am but I think you should check on your father. I will go and report back.'

She wavered for a moment, then gave him a sharp nod and returned inside the house. She ran upstairs and paused outside her father's bedroom to catch her breath. Slowly she pushed open the door. Inside the curtain rail had fallen down and the window was out, but it looked like the heavy material had caught most of the glass. Like downstairs, it was as if a tornado had been through the room. She trod carefully over to her father's bedside.

Professor Leo Summerlee's eyes were wide open. His white hair lay scuffed up round his head and his once neatly trimmed whiskers now merged with thick stubble. This was not the precise, withering intellectual she had known all her life. Pain and disappointment had stripped the proud scientist away and left a frail old man.

Milly leant over him. 'Papa, are you alright?'

Summerlee focused on his daughter's young face. His mouth worked as he tried to say something.

'It was a bomb,' said Milly. 'But it is alright. No one in the house is hurt.'

Summerlee reached for Milly's hand and grasped it weakly. Still he struggled to talk.

She came closer. ‘Don’t worry everything is fine. The aeroplanes have gone.’

Finally the Professor found his voice. ‘We were right weren’t we, my dear? We had to tell the world.’

‘Calm. We can talk in the morning. Sleep now.’

He closed his eyes. ‘We were scientists... ’ His hand fell back on the bedclothes. ‘We are not to blame… I am not to blame. Forgive me, George.’ His voice trailed off and his breathing became more regular as he drifted off again. Milly pulled back and watched until she was sure he had settled again. She straightened the sheets over him and brushed off some pieces of vase that lay on his counterpane.

‘Ma’am.’ Simpson was at the door.

She turned and put her finger to her lips. ‘Shh!’ She hustled him out of the room. ‘What did you see?’

‘Must have been at least a one tonne bomb; landed somewhere between 63 and 65. It has demolished sixty one and sixty seven.’

‘Any one hurt?’

‘Lots I think. There were three young chaps laid out on the pavement. It looked like the George boys.’

Milly put her hands to her mouth. ‘Oh Lord!’

‘Ma’am. You had better stay with your father. I am going to get some blankets and see what I can do outside.’

Simpson disappeared down into the basement and left Milly standing at the top of the stairs. She waited until she was sure he was gone and then hurried down and out of the front door and into the street.

So much dust and smoke now filled the air it caught in the back of her throat. The road was full of people and vehicles. She pushed her way through a crowd of onlookers and surveyed the damage. Two

houses had disappeared and, in their stead, lay a jumble of smouldering rubble, wooden timbers and furniture. The two adjoining houses sat tottering on the edge of this devastation with their innards opened and exposed to the spark-filled night. From under the tonnes of masonry came whimpers of agony and several men had started to clamber onto the ruins in search of survivors.

She looked up and noticed, on the third floor of number sixty-one, a piano was slowly slipping out over the abyss. It flipped over and fell, smashing into the rubble with a ghastly splitting of wood and shearing of wires.

'Madame, please step back.' A special constable stood before her, putting out an arm and trying to marshal the crowd back.

'Godammit constable, I'm a nurse. There are people in there that need my help.' said Milly pulling off her jacket and restoring the tight bun her short flight in the drawing room had loosened.

'It's all very unstable young lady. The army will be along in a minute...'

A scream for help cut him short and Milly ducked under his arm and sprinted on to the rubble. Scrabbling and slipping she headed for a point by number 67, where two beams were propping up a huge slab of fallen wall. From somewhere underneath came the sound of a man in pain. She peered into the narrow cave.

'Hello! Hello! Can you see me? Can you move?'

Someone shifted in the darkness. 'Ah! Yes, thank you. Thank you. My leg is stuck and I think it is in a bad way.'

Milly's heart sank. 'Mr George isn't it? It's Milly Summerlee here, number twenty-two. And don't worry, help is on its way. We will have you out of there very soon.' She reached towards him and found his hand.

‘Bless you, Ms Summerlee, but don’t worry about me. Can you see where my boys are? Are they alright? I had just put them to bed in the nursery, so I am hoping they have escaped all this.’

‘It is all a bit chaotic out here I am afraid, but I’m sure if they are out. Someone will be looking after them.’

Milly wormed her way deeper into the cave. Mr George lay on his back, mostly free of obstruction, but a heavy timber lying across his left leg was crushing it completely and he was losing blood.

‘Would you mind if I removed your belt, Mr George?’

Without waiting for an answer she slipped his belt off and looped it round his left upper thigh. Then she pulled it tight.

There was a strangled squawk from Mr George and he gently fainted.

With a sigh Milly realised she was stuck there, keeping pressure on the tourniquet until rescue came.

Outside she heard shouts.

Her legs were still out in the open, so she waggled them and shouted back.

Two male voices came closer. ‘Yes, this is that nurse. Can you move ma’am?’

‘Yes I can, but I am helping a man who is stuck under a beam,’ Milly replied.

The second voice was less distinct but she heard ‘Madame you shouldn’t be here, it is dangerous. I suggest you move so a gentleman can take over.’

‘I’m holding a tourniquet round the man’s leg. It’s bad. The femoral artery I think. He’s unconscious. If I let go he will lose more blood. Can you move this beam to my right?’

‘I’m not sure. It might bring the lot down,’ came the response.

‘Then you’ll just have to dig us both out. Mr George needs to get out of here. Very soon.’

‘I must insist, this is not a job for a woman.’

‘Oh, for God sake! Shift the bloody beam. Pull us out and then let’s argue about what sex his rescuer should be!’

Several voices drifted in from outside. ‘Right, we are going to try and move this, but the moment you see his leg is free call out. Do you understand?’

‘Perfectly.’

The next minute the timber began to shift very slowly. Dust and bits of masonry showered down on Milly and she began to lose sight of Mr George’s leg.

Suddenly the timber moved quickly.

‘Now!’ shouted Milly and she gripped tightly onto Mr George’s arm with one hand and the tourniquet with the other.

Firm hands dragged them out as the little cave began to collapse.

Outside she rolled over coughing to see smiling young man with wild, dust-filled hair looking down at her.

‘Oh, hello Tom,’ she said coughing.

‘Milly! I might have known,’ replied Thomas Challenger. ‘I’ll take that tourniquet.’

He knelt down and studied Mr George’s leg.

Milly stood and shook herself down. She watched as, with quick precise actions, he replaced the belt with a knotted rope and fixed a makeshift splint on the unconscious man’s mangled lower leg.

She had known Thomas ever since she could remember. For many years her father and his, Professor George Challenger, were rival academics in the same field. The children followed their fathers' lead and despised each other. However, after the old men shared their expedition to the Amazon and returned close friends, their children saw more of each other and developed their own friendship. They shared a lot: both had lost their mothers and both had distant and unpredictable fathers. Eventually it seemed only natural they grew close.

Thomas noticed she was looking at him. 'Judging my work? We are not going to save that.' He pointed to the lower leg. 'His pulse is faint but, thanks to you, he should survive. Stretcher! Over here!' he shouted. Then, quietly, in Milly's ear. 'Well done old girl, quick thinking.'

'Not bad for a woman is what *you're* thinking, isn't it?'

He was about to protest but the stretcher arrived and he became distracted. She knew he tried hard to be more modern in his thinking, but he was his father's son.

Once Mr George was on the stretcher she followed it down off the rubble pile where she found Simpson standing holding a blanket and watching her.

'Ma'am, shall I go back to the house and make sure the Professor is comfortable?'

He was waiting for her to protest and go back in his stead but she found she was less concerned about her own father than the wounded strangers around her. She spotted a man trying to put his jacket on with an obviously broken arm.

'You go, Simpson, make sure he is comfortable. I will be back soon.' And she hurried off to help the injured man.

All night she and Thomas stayed at the bombsite, helping the rescue teams move rubble and treat the injured. Milly had become a nurse

as soon as she was old enough being one of the few jobs she found stimulating and her father was prepared to accept her doing. At the same time Thomas had trained as a doctor and excelled academically but sadly, as well as his father's intelligence, he had inherited his father's temper and anti-authoritarian attitude. As a result he was still serving in St Mary's Hospital as a junior and had managed to alienate nearly every single consultant in the building.

Dawn came and the last of the fires were dampened down but still they searched. Ten hours after the explosion they gained access to the last basement at number 61 and found two people still alive. Despite ten deaths and many more injures, this lifted their spirits.

Finally, Milly felt she could stand no longer and sank onto a large piece of brickwork the explosion had left carelessly lying in the street. Her hands and clothes were caked in ash and masonry dust. She tried to wipe them on her velvet skirt but it just spread the dirt around.

For the first time, she realised she was still wearing her engagement ring. It was a tiny reminder of the quiet and normal evening she had been expecting before the explosion. Now one of the two small diamonds was missing. She cursed herself for not remembering to take it off. She looked up and saw Thomas wandering over. His jacket, tie and collar had long since been abandoned and his face and hair was so covered in dust it looked like he was wearing stage make-up. A soldier slapped him on the back and they shook hands. He had a warm smile and easy laugh that Milly had always found attractive.

But as she watched him, she frowned. Why did she find it so hard to name a day for the wedding? Her father's illness, the war - she had made several excuses to herself, but in truth it was deeper than that. She had seen how her mother and Mrs Challenger had lived and she dreaded following in their footsteps. The world had changed and she wanted a different life but she was convinced, despite his

protestations, that in time the Challenger within Thomas would out and he would expect her to become 'his' housewife.

Thomas was looking at her, trying to understand her expression.

'The ring,' she said, 'I'm afraid I have lost one of the stones.'

'I am sure it will turn up, once they sift through the 100 tonnes of rubble.'

'I am just worried it's an omen.'

He moved forward and held her hand. 'I don't believe in omens. I will get you another, don't worry.' He reached into his pocket and pulled out a surprisingly clean cotton handkerchief the size of a serviette and offered it to her.

'You haven't blown your nose on this, have you?' she asked as she started to wipe her face.

Thomas looked offended.

'Oh, Tom, you are so easy to tease. I must look a state.'

He self-consciously tried to control his own unruly hair. 'You and me both. How is the Professor? Did you tell him my speech is on Friday?'

Milly stopped wiping. 'His lungs are so weak. And no, I haven't mentioned your speech.'

'What! But he'll be so pleased that I have finally got a public forum. That letter from the Brazilian embassy will make them sit up. You must let him ...'

'For God's sake, Tom. Not this again! He's dying. I don't care about the bloody plateau. I do care about his peace of mind. He rambles on and on about it. He's tortured by guilt that somehow he has done something unforgiveable. And talk of your father just makes it worse.'

‘I’m sorry Milly, but this is so important. We have to make people listen.’

‘So important to you. To *you* Thomas.’ She sighed and straightened her dress. ‘You promised me you would not get yourself in trouble again. Whatever you do… They’ll shut you away and *this* time they *will* throw away the key. And, if you are too mule-headed to listen, make sure you leave Papa out of it.’

Thomas was about to answer but Milly stood. ‘Now, I’m tired and I know this has all the potential to develop into another argument, which will be very boring. So I’m leaving.’

Thomas leant forward to kiss her but she had already turned to walk home.

As she approached her father’s house Simpson came hurrying down the steps.

She immediately noticed the expression on his face and stopped walking. ‘No, no. Please no,’ she whispered.

‘I am afraid it is the Professor, ma’am.’ Simpson hesitated. ‘He has just passed away.’

CHAPTER THREE

Thomas Challenger sat up in his chair and tried to straighten his hair. Since he was a child his thick black mop had never done what was asked of it. If his mother had still been alive, she would have been licking her fingers and trying to plaster it down so he would look 'smart'. But that never worked.

The thought of his mother also made him subconsciously check his fingernails. He was nervous and, inside his thick wool three-piece, he was getting warmer and warmer. It had taken months of patient campaigning to get himself this public forum and, now the moment had come, he was terrified. Milly would not be here to support him either. She had taken her father's death badly and was in no mood to hear about expeditions and lost plateaus.

He too missed the professor. They had grown close in the last few years and he found himself playing the role of the son Summerlee had never had, listening for hours to his methodical analysis of ammonite taxonomy. Partly he did this because he loved the man's daughter, but also because he saw the old man as the father he never felt he had. Summerlee was always at home or in the museum, always happy to talk even if it was exclusively about palaeontology. He was a constant presence - something Professor George Challenger, Thomas' real father, never was.

Since Thomas could remember, his father was constantly away on some great adventure. Maybe once a year he would blow into the house, cause chaos, upset everyone and leave. He was so famous that everyone else knew more about him, and what he was up to, than Thomas did. His life was magnificent and exciting and Thomas fully expected to join him on his travels when he grew up. But then, on one wild expedition, the professor simply disappeared and so did the life Thomas thought he would have. The gale force that had swirled around him evaporated. The war came and everyone forgot the colourful professor and his extraordinary life. But Thomas

couldn’t. Somewhere inside a void had opened up that he couldn’t fill. Answers were needed to questions - questions no one was around any more to answer. He knew the world had moved on but he couldn’t.

He looked round the stuffy anteroom, at the paintings of stern, whiskery old scientists staring down and judging him. He checked his watch, he checked his notes, and he checked his nails again.

The noise of crisp footsteps in the corridor outside made him stand up.

Mr August Pinser, the Institute’s secretary, came in holding a copy of Thomas’s lecture. He was a shrivelled man with small, half-moon glasses and an awkward comb over which, to Thomas, indicated a vanity that was wholly unearned.

He gestured for Thomas to sit down.

‘Right, I think I will be perfectly honest with you, Dr Challenger. I have never been in favour of this. Since you are only a medical doctor and not a zoologist, I argued strongly against giving you a platform at the Zoological Institute’s Hall tonight.’

Thomas attempted to interject but Pinser ignored him. ‘When the committee approved this talk I definitely caught a whiff of sentimentality in the decision but, all the same, here we are.’

‘Indeed and thank you for your words of encouragement,’ said Thomas, determined not to rise to Pinser’s goading.

Pinser forced a smile. ‘It is my responsibility to remind you that your talk tonight will be confined to the brief outlined in this paper you supplied entitled, “Reviewing the Evidence for Lazarus Taxa in Amazonia”.’ He paused and looked at Thomas over his glasses. ‘I am not stupid, doctor, this is clearly an attempt to rehabilitate your father’s reputation. I still remember the chaos he caused when we granted him a similar honour. I will not let that be repeated.’

‘My father gave this hall a place in history.’

‘Pah! I seem to remember he released some sort of wild animal that fortunately escaped and then rattled off a series of unscientific observations that he subsequently utterly failed to confirm.’

‘He gave his life trying to prove himself to people like you!’

Pinser was unmoved. ‘The idea that dinosaurs have survived to the modern day, no matter how remote their location, was and is utterly, utterly absurd. If you want to make an idiot of yourself and ruin any academic career before it has even started, be my guest. But I will not let you drag the good name of this Institute down with you.’

Thomas was almost choking with anger, but he was not going to give Pinser any excuse to stop the talk. He swallowed hard. ‘Thank you for those wise words. The Institute’s reputation is safe with me. Now, if you would be so kind, could you show me the way to the stage?’

Pinser waved his hand as if tired of the whole subject and led him off down a dimly lit corridor until he came to a small door. Behind were some stairs up to the stage.

Thomas listened for the murmur of the audience but it did seem strangely quiet. He climbed up and, as he stepped out on to the stage behind the lectern, he realised why. At a quick estimate, there were no more than a dozen people present.

As he walked past, Pinser hissed. ‘Oh damn, I think I forgot to advertise the talk. Good luck old chap.’

So saying he gave Thomas’s name and the title of his paper and took a seat in the front row.

Thomas looked about. There were two old men fast asleep and Pinser quickly struck up a conversation with another couple, ignoring Thomas. However, by the door, there were six or seven well-dressed

young men who were clearly interested in what he had to say. Journalists, thought Thomas.

He drew a long breath and then started. ‘Six years ago an expedition was organised by this Institute to investigate strange zoological sightings reported from an unexplored part of the Amazon rainforest. It was led by Professor George Challenger, my father, and he was accompanied by three expedition members: Professor Leo Summerlee, Lord John Roxton and journalist Edward Malone. They were independent witnesses chosen by the Institute. On their return they all claimed they had found an isolated plateau on which several species of animals long thought to be extinct had survived. Creatures, including dinosaurs, that my father subsequently labelled Lazarus Taxa, because they had seemingly come back from the dead.’

One old man in the back row stood up. ‘Isn’t this a talk about axolotl? I was sure this was about amphibians.’

‘No Professor,’ said Pinser with a smirk. ‘That is tomorrow.’

‘Oh,’ he said and left.

Thomas shook his head and continued. ‘The news of his discovery was reported across the globe. For a moment in time, science, evolution and the Japura plateau were the focus of the world’s press. But, before this honourable institution, or indeed any institution had time to organise a second expedition, the storm clouds of war gathered. Professor Challenger returned alone to the jungle and was never seen again. Doubts were raised about the whole episode and, against a background of mounting tension across Europe, the extraordinary discoveries made in the Amazon were forgotten.’

‘But, before he disappeared, Professor Challenger sent me a letter from the Amazonian capitol, Manaos. It contained some extraordinary revelations that, until now, our own government has sought to suppress.’

Thomas paused. He noticed Pinser had stopped talking and was watching him. 'My father discovered that one expedition had followed up on his work and *every single member of that team was German*!'

Pinser jumped to his feet. 'Dr Challenger, what has this to do with Lazarus Taxa?'

Thomas ignored him. 'Since that letter I have attempted to draw our authority's attention to my concerns. But I have been hounded at every turn. Imprisoned and even blocked from serving my country because I was labelled as an unstable scaremonger.'

'Right!' screeched Pinser as he headed back up on to the stage. 'I knew it. This lecture is *over*.'

Thomas brandished a letter. 'Since Brazil declared war on the Hun I have been in correspondence with contacts up and down the Amazon. I now have irrefutable evidence that …'

Pinser was bearing down on him but, just as Thomas was preparing flatten him, he noticed that the 'journalists' had also got up and were just behind him. For a second he though they would restrain Pinser, but then the lead young man pushed the apoplectic secretary aside.

'Dr Thomas Challenger, I am arresting you under the provisions of the 1661 Sedition Act.'

'No!' Thomas started to shout, but somebody grabbed his arms and wrestled him to the ground. 'The Germans!. We have to find out what they ..!' As he felt a gag being wrapped round his mouth he looked out on his audience. The two scientists were still asleep.

CHAPTER FOUR

'Find him!' shouted Captain Von Heket. 'Front gate says he passed them twenty-one minutes ago. He cannot know we have discovered him yet and he is on foot. I want every inch of the road between here and Emmendingen searched. Move!'

The alarm had been raised when Von Heket was in the middle of a dissection and now the whole specimen would be wasted. It would be weeks before another male was ready. That annoyed him more than the news that the castle's security protocols were clearly incompetent.

He pulled off his bloody apron. 'Where is Oberleutnant Grebben hiding?'

His head of security hurried over and threw him a sharp salute while trying to avoid direct eye contact.

'Sir?' said Grebben.

Von Heket, his face flushed with anger, stood very close to the Oberleutnant. 'For the moment I am going to overlook the fact that you apparently recruited a British spy to work in our kitchens. But only because we have to act fast to catch him. It goes without saying that a captured spy will sound better for you at your court martial than an escaped spy…'

He took a long breath and looked around the bunkroom. It was one of the new buildings thrown up to cope with the extra staff he had taken on.

Grebben's men had done a routine search of the workers' quarters and found a pad in one of the kitchen staff's beds. Although mysteriously blank, one sharp-eyed security officer had then noticed the imprint of a Morse code message on its pages. On further study he realised it detailed the position and size of their facility – the

Black Forest Biowaffen Unit at Castle Hochberg, deep in southern Germany.

On the face of it, this was a disaster. Von Heket didn't want *anyone* to know what he was really up to at the Castle, least of all the Allies, but he could still turn this to his advantage.

Once he felt calmer Von Heket continued. 'Let's use our heads shall we? If the search party doesn't find him nearby we need to cut off his escape routes. He needs to transmit his message and his range will be limited, so he is not going to be heading further into Germany. That means he is either heading west or south. There are no direct roads going west, but send men to Reute and Nimburg anyway. Meanwhile, you,' he pointed at Grebben, 'Drive straight south to Wasser and set up a roadblock on the Freiberg road.'

A soldier approached Grebben and gave him a note and a wooden bead necklace.

'Well, what is it Oberleutnant?' asked Von Heket impatiently. 'Found a French spy too?'

'Captain, we have now searched the compound twice. There is no transmitting device of any kind on the grounds. He cannot have sent any message from here. We did find these in his locker'

Von Heket looked at the beads. 'Sandlewood. This is a Hindi mala. Odd… Get my car. I am going into Emmendingen.'

As Von Heket stepped out of the long bunkroom to see the facility in up-roar. A stream of cars and trucks were being loaded with armed staff by the main gate before heading off down the twisting road from the Castle to the nearest town of Emmendingen.

This would upset the locals. He was well aware of how terrified they were of the Castle and its secrets but was happy to keep it that way. Especially now he had initiated limited releases and people had started to disappear. He didn't want to have to explain himself to anyone until he was ready.

Then he noticed how quiet the animals were. Normally the Castle was a cacophony of screeches and barks, but while his staff ran about they had become subdued. They were listening. They knew something was up and they were curious.

He thrilled at the thought of their vicious primeval intelligence.

It was late evening by the time Von Heket's staff car swung into Emmendingen marktplatz. The driver pulled up outside the stable of a large gasthaus at the corner of the square where he had agreed to meet with Grebben. If the roadblocks had been put up in time his young quarry would know by now he was trapped. However, one thing puzzled Von Heket: where was his Morse transmitter? The front line was over 50 miles away, at Altkirch. Even if the spy made it to Freiberg, he would not be close enough to send a signal.

He stepped out of the car and headed into the gasthaus. Inside there was a long bar lit by oil lamps and warmed by a large fire. Numerous prints and brasses decorated the walls, giving the place a chaotic but homely feel. Von Heket hated it.

He approached the bar where a large lady gave him the most welcoming smile she could manage.

'A glass of hot water, please,' he said.

She glanced at Grebben, who was standing to attention at the end of the bar, and then did as she was asked, disappearing out the back to heat some water.

'Well?' said Von Heket.

Grebben swallowed. 'The local butcher saw him enter the village about an hour ago. We have now searched every house and questioned all seventy inhabitants, but so far we have not found him or his transmitter.'

Von Heket was stumped. He knew there was no point in the spy keeping a transmitter here, even if he could trust someone to look

after it, because its range would be too short. He pulled the prayer beads out of his pocket and passed them through his fingers. They had a distinctive tartan ribbon hanging off them. Who was this man?

The bar woman returned with his water and he pulled out some coca leaves and dropped them in the glass. Reverentially he cupped the glass to his nose and breathed in the vapour. A sly smile crept across his face as the camphoraceous smell reminded him of the Amazon. How he wished he was still in that bright, brutal wilderness rather than a stuffy gasthaus.

He wandered outside for some air and looked at the clear evening sky. A perfect line of deep red still marked out the black silhouettes of the trees on the horizon. High above a single plane laboured its way towards them out of the vastness of the west. The air was so still he could make out the sound of its engines.

Suddenly he threw down the glass and beads. 'Grebben! Out here!' he shouted. 'It's a Handley Page. That plane is British!'

'Shall we try to shoot it down, sir'

'Don't be stupid, no.' Von Heket's mind was working fast. 'Don't you see? The transmitter is here somewhere. He is going to send the message to that plane.'

At that moment the stable doors behind them burst open and a man riding bare back on a large grey horse clattered out across the square.

Grebben drew his pistol but, just as he was about to fire, Von Heket grabbed his wrist.

'Are the roadblocks in place as instructed?'

'Yes.'

'Then don't harm him.'

'Sir?'

‘My guess is his transmitter and aerial are somewhere in the forest and he will lead us straight there. If I am right, he will not live long enough to send a signal.’

He ran to his car. ‘After that horseman!’

The rider initially headed directly south towards Freiburg but then, as Von Heket guessed, he left the road and set off across the fields, directly southwest, straight into the woods.

Von Heket smiled. He had managed to engineer an interesting experiment out of a security disaster.

‘Stop the car!’

He jumped out. It was getting dark now but the moon was out and everything was visible in muted shades of grey. In front of him the ground gently sloped upwards to a line of trees. He could just make out the dark outline of the rider urging his mount across the rough terrain.

Above, the Handley had started to circle.

‘Go and check with your men on the other side of the wood at Nimburg and Reute,’ ordered Von Heket. ‘Tell them on no account to enter the woods. Can you manage that?’

Grebben saluted and ran back to his car.

Von Heket watched as the horse and rider threaded their way into the woods. He waited until the noise of Grebben’s car died away and then took a deep breath. It was quiet except for the distant drone of the plane above. He enjoyed the anticipation.

First he caught a whiff on the breeze. He moved away from the petrol fumes of the car and sniffed the night air. There it was the sweet sour smell of rotting meat. Next a terrified whinny cut through the darkness. A horse was being attacked somewhere in the forest, a ghastly series of cries the only testament to a violent and painful death.

Von Heket eagerly scanned up and down the dark line of trees. He started to walk forward to get a better look.

'Sir, it might be dangerous,' hissed his driver.

'Shut up, man! There, look!'

Out of the trees stumbled a figure. He fell in the long grass then rose quickly and tried to run, but he was limping badly. He had managed about 100 feet before he fell and had to start crawling.

Behind him the dark moon shadows thrown by the trees started to move. Two small shapes detached themselves from the tree line and silently sped across the grass towards the man. He had a pistol and fired twice as the shadows approached but it did not stop them. As they enveloped him, a single scream echoed across the valley.

Other shadows now seemed to slip from the darkness of the wood and float across the field.

Von Heket was transfixed. 'See the shadows walk,' he muttered to himself.

'Sir, you must get in the car. Please!'

'Nonsense.' He was perfectly aware of the danger he was in. It was like the plateau all over again, but this time he was in control.

He looked up at the circling plane. There was just one more thing to do to make this a perfect night's work. He pulled a small vial of black liquid out of his pocket. Then he took off his jacket and shirt and threw them at his driver. Carefully dabbing the liquid on to his hands, he then proceeded to smear it over his torso.

'Wait here. I will need a lift back to the Castle later,' ordered Von Heket.

'Are you sure, sir? I really think we should leave,' said the frightened driver as he closed the car windows.

Von Heket turned and headed off towards the woods. ‘There is a transmitter in that forest and up there is a plane expecting a message and I, for one, am not going to disappoint it,’ was the reply.

CHAPTER FIVE

Three days passed and no one talked to Thomas. He had been bundled out of the institute and taken to a Knightsbridge police

station. He continued to protest his cause, but they made sure he was alone in his cell.

Later he was hooded and moved to somewhere nearby, he guessed it was Whitehall. He was dragged down endless, echoing corridors and stumbled down enough staircases to suggest he was deep under London. Finally, he was handcuffed to what felt like a rough, iron-framed bed. He lay there for hours, angry and frustrated. Inside that smelly sack he was forced to think. He hated thinking, he liked doing. Alone he stewed. No one understood, no one listened to him – not the smug consultants at Mary's, the fat scientists at the Institute, not even his adorable Milly. Why could they not see the world as he did? Now he found himself handcuffed to a bed in some cell for just trying to speak out. Maybe he should be worried about what they were going to do to him but he was too incensed to be frightened. When a restless sleep came he dreamt he was trying to find Milly in some dense jungle, but the more he searched the thicker the green walls around him grew.

He woke to someone tugging his hood off, while a second undid his cuffs.

He sat up on his bed and groaned. His back was stiff and his arms seized by pins and needles.

'This way,' barked the larger of the two soldiers in front of him.

He was in a small brick cell with no windows. It was a miserable little room that just oozed despair. For the first time he felt vulnerable, his sense of injustice abandoned him and it occurred to him he might die here. He stood and staggered out as quickly as he could. Outside was a wide, long corridor with an arched ceiling.

Waiting for him under the dim light of a single bulb was an officer. He was broad like Thomas, but taller and tougher looking. His square jaw, thin lips and pale blue eyes were set hard and when he talked he seemed to draw a voice up from somewhere deeper than

his chest. 'My name is Captain Alec Gregory. You don't need to know anything else about me.'

Thomas didn't need to be an acute judge of character to know there was no point in arguing. 'Why am I not dead already?'

Gregory ignored him but, as he turned away, indicated he should follow. As they walked Thomas distinctly heard him mumble 'Good fucking question.'

They left the two guards behind and were off again down long corridors. It was cooler here and smelt of a mixture of soot and damp. Thomas guessed they were now probably somewhere under the Thames. He tried to straighten his collar and jacket but his arms were still numb. For once, he didn't bother with his hair.

After about 100 yards they came to a large metal door.

Gregory braced himself and slid it to one side. Inside was a well-lit anteroom with another large door at the other end. On the walls were hooks hung with what looked like protective clothing. On a central table was an array of equipment including nets, a collar and electrical prods.

Two men sat smoking in the corner and quickly stood to attention when Gregory walked in. They looked exhausted.

'Stand down. How are things?' asked the Captain.

'It's safely in its box, Sir,' came the reply.

'Good. Challenger, sit.'

Until he had entered this room Thomas' fury at the way he had been treated had dominated his thoughts. He assumed he was here to be bullied into silence or, perhaps worse, executed. But now, for the first time as he looked around, he realised something else might be going on and his anger started to melt away as another stronger emotion took over, curiosity.

He always had what Summerlee called an enquiring mind and, at this particular moment, he was very grateful for it. Something secret and important was happening here and they clearly didn't mind him witnessing it. He noticed the protective clothing was rather crudely made and one outfit had a nasty rip in it. The room smelt odd too, a musty oily scent that he also started to taste.

Gregory took up a position by the door and waited. Soon footsteps approached and in walked Major Edward Creed.

Thomas laughed. 'I just knew you would be behind this. What was it? Slow day at the office. I know. Let's arrest Challenger again.'

Creed was a smart, slight man with ginger hair and a soft Scottish accent. His uniform was spotless and he wore a small, waxed moustache. Before the war he was a journalist on *The Sketch* and had seemed driven to destroy the reputation of everyone who had gone on his father's expedition to the Amazon. He wrote several articles rubbishing Professor Challenger's research methods. He drove Professor Summerlee into retirement and exposed the chaotic private life of Lord John Roxton - which admittedly wasn't that difficult.

When war came he seemed to disappear. That was until Thomas started a campaign to find out what happened to his father. Then up he had popped again. Creed had, it seemed, joined the Government's secret service, Section 6, and become a spy. This time it appeared he had made it his mission to silence Thomas, even going as far as getting him arrested under the Official Secrets Act.

Creed sat down opposite him. 'You really aren't as important as you think, doctor. Believe me, Section 6 has better things to do than silence medical personnel with paternal complexes.'

Thomas felt his anger return.'I know you have people on the Central Medical Committee that stopped me serving at the Front.'

‘I know, conspiracies everywhere. Anyway, I am not here to debate with you. I require your assistance.’

‘What?! If you think … you’re mad.’

Creed nodded to Gregory. ‘Proceed, Captain.’ But the captain hesitated for a moment.

‘Are you sure, Sir?’

‘That was an order, in case you were confused.’

Gregory sighed and slipped out of the room. A moment later came the sound of something being wheeled down the corridor. He returned followed by a gurney being pushed by a young corporal, on which sat something covered with a woollen blanket.

Creed stood. ‘Doctor, I need a second opinion. Would you please come and look at this specimen?’

‘Roberts, please remove the blanket.’

Thomas folded his arms. He was not going to play along with Creed. Instead he silently watched the corporal roll up the blanket with a studied indifference. But that was when he noticed something odd about the corporal. Although he had short hair and wore a jacket and trousers, his thin elfin face was quite beautiful.

Before he could check himself Thomas blurted out: ‘That Corporal is a woman!’

Everyone in the room looked at him.

‘Your powers of observation are exceptional, Doctor,’ said Creed dryly. ‘Although you’ll be astounded to hear I did know that already. Her name is Roberts. However, it was not the Corporal I required you to look at, but what lies on the gurney.’

‘And why should I help you with anything, Creed?’ said a flustered Thomas.

‘Major Creed,’ he corrected. ‘Because, at this moment, you really have no choice. Would you prefer to return to your cell?’

The threat was persuasive but, in truth, it was his curiosity that drove Thomas to approach the gurney.

Roberts pulled the blanket off to reveal a large jar full of liquid. As she did so she leant closer to Thomas. She smelt of tobacco and vanilla. ‘Honour to meet you, sir. Corporal Freya Roberts. Your father was a genius. I’ve read everything he’s written. His destruction of racial senility theories was brilliant, just …’

‘Yes, thank you, Corporal Roberts!’ interrupted Creed. ‘You can step back now.’

‘Sir.’

As she stepped away Thomas thought he caught her wink at him. Despite her meek smile, there was a quick intelligence about her eyes. He was about to ask what her role in all this was, when he noticed Gregory was right beside him.

‘Just tell us what you see,’ he growled.

Within the jar floated a large plate shaped piece of bone. As he peered closer Thomas picked up the smell of formaldehyde. The sample was a section of a huge skull, with only a few patches of burnt flesh still attached. For a moment Thomas was lost in wonder, then a smile stretched across his face.

‘I don’t believe it,’ he murmured.

He turned to Creed who, for the first time, was looking a little uncomfortable. ‘This is not from any animal alive today, yet it is a fresh specimen. It is not a fossil. How did *you* come by it?’

‘Let’s just say it landed in our lap.’

Thomas fought to control his frustration. Everyone in the room seemed to know more than him but he could not work out what

game they were playing. He shrugged and decided to keep quiet.

Creed approached. ‘You might find this interesting too.’ He wheeled the gurney round and pointed. The inside of the skull lay open on the reverse, the edges were charred and its contents missing.

On closer inspection, Thomas noticed a web of tiny copper wires flattened against the interior of the cranium. He followed them down to the base of the skull, where they exited through a small hole.

‘Do you have a magnifying glass?’

Roberts stepped forward with one and a torch.

He peered into the formaldehyde. At the hole, the bone had grown round the wire.
Thomas puffed his cheeks and found himself thinking aloud. ‘These wires run from, or too, the major pain centres of the brain. This is a very sophisticated piece of work and must have been carried out when the animal was young, judging by the regrowth.’

Creed just listened. The room was quiet for a moment until Thomas decided to try and take the initiative. ‘However, you don’t need protective clothing and electric prods for a pickled specimen.’

Creed nodded. ‘Roberts, would you like to show Dr Challenger our guest?’

She went over and pulled down a couple of the protective overalls and offered one to Thomas. ‘You shouldn’t need this, but just in case it might help.’

Thomas tried to catch up with what was going on. ‘Forgive me, Madame, I mean, Corporal Roberts, but I take it you are proposing to show me some kind of animal. What type?’

‘Arthropoda, I believe, Sir.’

‘Thank you, but some heavy gloves should be enough.’

‘I am afraid not, Doctor. I must insist you put this on.’

As Thomas struggled into his overalls, Gregory wandered over to Roberts and whispered something to her. She busied herself with her clothing and seemed to ignore him. Eventually, when they were all suited, she led Thomas off into the room next door.

Like the last it was well lit, but completely lined in white tiles. The musty smell was much stronger in here with pungent hints of ammonia. The room appeared empty except for a metal table in the centre with a heavy wooden box about six foot long and two foot wide sitting on it.

As Roberts shut the door behind them he noticed the box move slightly.

‘Right,’ said Roberts handing him a torch, ‘I will open the lid a little and keep my weight on it. I am hoping that will give you enough to make an identification.’

‘Why haven’t you anaesthetised it?’

‘Most chemicals we tried just made it angry. Chloroform put it down for a while, but then it woke up when we weren’t expecting it. Not a nice surprise.’ She leant down hard on the lid and undid the clasps that held it tight.

Suddenly the lid leapt up.

Roberts shifted her entire weight on to it, but its occupant was clearly very strong for its size. Slowly she shifted back, sliding the lid with her and leaving a four to five inch gap at one end.

She looked up, grinning at Thomas. ‘Well, what are you waiting for?’

He approached and, as he peered in, two deep purple claws shoved through the gap.

Thomas jumped backwards. ‘A scorpion! But those pincers must be six inches long.’

Roberts grunted with the effort of holding the lid down. ‘Look again. Those are his mouthparts. His pincers are too big to shove into that gap.’

Thomas returned to the box. ‘Paired chelicerae. They are long. One, two, three, four segments – that’s wrong.’ Despite the torch he could only see parts of the giant creature; the manus of one claw, a section of hard-ridged prosoma and four, paired, malevolent eyes. ‘How long is it?’

‘Ah, four or five foot.’ Roberts was tiring.

The creature’s mouthparts were now working the edge of the box tearing into the wood. Then it stopped chewing and started pushing straight up, lifting woman and lid.

Roberts grasped the side of the box and pulled down. Again the lid lifted.

‘I … think…we had better … leave now,’ Roberts had flushed red with the strain and the chelicerae was starting to push further out of the box.

Thomas took the metal handle of his torch and banged it hard on the table.

For a moment the pushing stopped, the creature seeming to freeze at the unexpected sound.

The lid slammed back down on the box and Roberts immediately fixed the clasps.

‘It would seem it also has vibration sensitive sensilla.’

As helped her off the crate she dropped down close to him. There was that strong sweet scent fighting against the oily smell of the room. He breathed it in.

‘Tabac Blond,’ she said looking up at him. ‘Better than essence d’creepy crawly don’t you think?’

Thomas blushed and stepped away. She continued to watch him, her brown eyes inviting trust.

'What is going on here Corporal?' he asked. 'Do these things have something to do with my father?'

She glanced at the door and, for a moment, she looked as if she was going to confide in him but then stopped herself. 'Major Creed is just outside. I am afraid you really should be asking him.'

Thomas followed her out of the room and as he looked up Creed was waiting for him with the same smug look on his face. He couldn't hold it in any longer. He leapt at the Major, grabbing him by the neck.

Creed crumpled to the ground rather faster than Thomas was expecting and both men rolled onto the floor.

Thomas was first up and stood over his victim, spitting with anger. 'You know about the plateau! You've always known. You drove my father mad just to keep him quiet you bastard!'

Creed glanced behind Thomas, causing him to turn. Just in time to see Gregory's fist approaching fast. And everything went dark.

Voices scratched away at Thomas's consciousness. '… much longer … stopped bleeding … warned you …' He became aware that a rough cloth was being pressed against his nose. He opened his eyes and saw Roberts' waif-like face close to his.

She smiled. 'Don't move. I am afraid you are going to have a nasty bruise.' She dabbed a bit more.

Thomas was propped up in a chair.

'Back with us, Doctor?' said Creed.

Thomas took the cloth off Roberts and sat up. He had never been hit as hard before. His head was swimming and he didn't feel like talking, so he just nodded.

‘Good. I see you have inherited your father’s temper. Now, let me elaborate.’ He stood and started to pace back and forth as he talked,

Thomas chose not to follow his progress as moving his head made him feel sick.

‘You cannot really blame us for scepticism. When your father and his friends came back from Brazil they made complete fools of themselves. With the money from their mystery diamonds they had ‘found’, they swanned about town telling tall stories of monsters and dinosaurs. They did not behave like serious scientists and, therefore, the newspapers and journalists like myself did not treat them as such …’

Thomas tried to argue, but Creed waved at him to be silent. ‘When the war started, the world moved on. But then you piped up with your one-man campaign and, I have to confess, I was angry. Thousands of soldiers dying every day, our very nation fighting for its survival, and I had to waste time on you.’

Creed paused and then sat down opposite Thomas. ‘But all that is in the past and the past does not matter. All that matters is that we win this war as quickly as possible and save as many Allied lives as possible. If we can shorten it by even one day, it will make a difference. Can we agree on that much?’

Thomas said nothing, just continued to dab his nose.

‘Will you cooperate? Your country does finally need you Dr Challenger.’

Thomas drew some air in through his swollen nose. He was trapped. Much though he loathed Creed, he only had one choice.

‘You could at least apologise.’

‘It wouldn’t change anything.’

Thomas suddenly felt a long way from the shore. Creed held all the cards and all Thomas’s anger and frustration meant nothing in this

room. He had been right all along but did anyone anywhere care any more. Again curiosity came to his aid and perhaps a fear of missing out.

'Well, without further study I cannot identify the skull fragment but what you have next door is some sort of gigantic protoscorpion. Very nasty – does it have a stinger?'

Roberts, who had been hovering nearby, stepped forward excitedly. 'Indeed. It measures about 5 inches long and seems to contain a powerful neurotoxin. It caught one of the handlers on the leg. He is still alive, but paralysed and on a respirator.

Roberts really was not like any woman Thomas had met before. He turned to Creed.

'I recruited Roberts from Cambridge. She is a zoologist and came highly recommended,' said Creed.

'Studied under Professor Renchard, Applied Zoology. Perhaps you have heard of him?'

Thomas shook his head. 'What do you want with me, Creed? You already know what I told you. Have you found my father too? Is he working for the Germans or held hostage? Just stop smirking and tell me what you want.'

Creed patted a thick file that was on the table in front of him. 'For some months now we have had reports of "devils and demons" attacking our men on the Front. Descriptions from survivors were so varied and unlikely that, at first, we assumed the Germans had invented a new form of nerve gas that produced powerful hallucinations. The effect on morale has been catastrophic. After so many years of war, our men are ready to believe anything. The latest rumour is that the Germans are using spiritualists to open the very gates of hell…'

'Then, a month ago, the first piece of hard evidence turned up. That creature in there was one of about a dozen that attacked our

trenches near Lens. It was cornered by a couple of sappers in a dugout. They shot it twice, but that did not seem to slow it. Eventually they managed to trap it in a trunk.'

Suddenly Gregory interrupted. 'Sir, I must protest. I see no reason why this man should be a party to such highly classified information. You know that our scientists are convinced these specimens are the result of secret breeding programmes in Germany.'

'Oh and how exactly do *your* scientists suggest you go about breeding an extinct scorpion?' scoffed Thomas.

'And do you know all the species of scorpion in the world, Doctor? They could have found one anywhere and given it some growth elixir.'

'Growth elixir! That's ridiculous.'

'No more than a plateau full of extinct creatures. You would not believe some of the things German scientists are working on at this …'

Creed raised his hand and gave Gregory a look to stop him midflow. 'The Captain does have a point. Scientists have given us submarines, tanks, flamethrowers and airships. I would not be surprised if the inventive Hun has not found a way to breed freakish monsters.'

'We may be good at making crude weapons of destruction, Major, but when it comes to biology we are little better than the cavemen. Selective breeding cannot recreate what evolution has abandoned. I am convinced that protoscorpion in there is a living fossil. I tell you, it is a Lazarus creature straight from the plateau.'

'Bollocks,' observed Gregory.

'I appreciate that level of scientific debate might work for you in Section 6, but it won't get you the answers you need. If you are all still so reluctant to admit you were wrong about the plateau, then I am guessing you have got spies searching the length and breadth of

Germany for these amazing breeding stations. Again why do you need my help?'

Thomas noticed Gregory and Roberts share a look again.

Creed sighed . 'We can no longer afford to overlook the fact that your father might have been on to something. The Germans may well be on the plateau. Whatever they are doing, we need to find out and stop them. I have no idea whether they have your father or indeed whether they killed him.' Creed leant forward. 'If you would care to accompany a new expedition to the Japura Plateau you would find out.'

At last Creed had made his offer. Thomas thought for a moment. 'You can call upon a hundred Captain Iron-Fists over there,' he said, nodding at Gregory. 'Why me?'

'Well, lots of reasons really. If your father is helping them you will be the best person to talk to him. You know his work better than anyone and, to put it bluntly, we may know how to fight Germans but we have no idea how to fight 'Lazarus creatures', or whatever they are.'

Thomas stood. His head was clearer now. For the first time the prospect of finding out what happened to his father had become a reality but he was far from clear about how he felt. His campaign had not been driven by any great love for the bullish old man. He didn't miss him. But, at every turn, the questions had just kept piling up and he desperately needed some answers.

Creed knew he was now pushing against an open door.

'Alright. But it will take weeks to get out there and the war won't wait. As I understand it the German spring offensive is close to Amiens.'

'That is why you are going by airship.'

‘What!’ cried Thomas, his eyes widening. ‘You are crossing the Atlantic in a dirigible? Those things are death traps. Your team won’t even get as far as the jungle.’

‘A complete waste of precious resources if you ask me,’ Gregory muttered. ‘We should concentrate on Germany.’

‘Enough!’ spat Creed. ‘May I remind you Captain, recent communications suggest that is also a waste of time. Now, you have your orders and I expect you to carry them out to the letter. Do I make myself clear?’

Gregory nodded.

Creed turned back. ‘The team, equipment and transport have all been arranged. You are the only non-military member. You have already met Corporal Roberts and Captain Gregory. The rest await you in a modified R34, tethered down in Southampton.’

‘With all due respect, I’m not sure it’s appropriate for Corporal Roberts to …’

‘I am not concerned what you think. But you might note that Roberts is not frightened of airship travel. You will fly to Lisbon and then cross to Para in Brazil and on to Manaos. You should make the crossing in less than four days and, with the help of supplies from Florida, the airship will then be able to continue and place you directly on the plateau. There will not be an enemy aircraft within a thousand miles of you, and it is by far the quickest and most efficient way of getting you there.’

‘But. But... that’s almost five thousand miles,’ Thomas protested although, even as he said it, he realised there was more to the idea than he was willing to admit.

Creed did not miss his change in demeanour and headed for the door. ‘You have forty-eight hours to get your affairs in order and pack a maximum of...’ He looked at Gregory.

‘Forty pounds of personal luggage, Sir,’ was the answer.

‘Yes, forty pounds. One more thing, it would be very useful if we had someone with more local knowledge on the mission, someone who perhaps has been to the Japura Plateau before. Any suggestions?’

Thomas was confused for a minute. His father, Professor Summerlee and Edward Malone were all dead so there was only one person he could think of. ‘What? You want me to contact Lord Roxton?’

‘Ah, Lord John Roxton … I hadn’t thought of that. Good suggestion.’ Creed disappeared out of the door.

Thomas looked at Gregory. ‘I hardly know his Lordship, but I suspect he would shoot Creed on sight if he knew he was alive.’

‘Perhaps that is why the Major wants *you* to bloody contact him,’ said Gregory.

And that, thought Thomas, was probably the real reason Creed had hauled him in: to draw Roxton back to the plateau.

He stood for a moment trying to make sense of what was happening. In the last few hours he had experienced a bewildering set of emotions but now he realised there was yet another one. Excitement. He had to agree, from the point of view of Gregory’s cold hard science, the idea of a plateau full of extinct animals was absurd. But the romance of it all was magnificent. He started to smile at the irony but the swelling bruise under his eye quickly stopped it spreading.

Roberts stepped forward and touched his arm. ‘It’s time some scientists followed up Professor Challenger’s magnificent work. I promise I will not let you down.’

‘I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to doubt you. He is right. There are so many lives at stake.’

Gregory handed him his jacket. ‘You had better hurry up, Challenger. You don’t have much time. Also, you might not know it, but you will

have missed Professor Summerlee's funeral by now.'

CHAPTER SIX

Thomas ran up the road from Warwick Avenue tube. He wasn't sure why, because he already knew he was too late for the funeral. As he approached number 22 Warrington Crescent he practiced his excuses. He knew he had let Milly down but hoped his news might give her a lift. Ahead the ruins of four large terraced house sat stark

against the blue sky and almost every window in the street was shuttered with wooden boards.

He was about to knock when the doorknob twisted and Simpson swung open the door.

Thomas lifted a smile onto his face. ‘Good morning, Simpson. Is Ms Summerlee at home?’

Simpson nodded but did not say anything. He just stepped back and let Thomas in.

As he entered his eyes had to adjust for the darkness. With boards over the windows there was very little light. The house was closed against the bright spring day. A fire was burning in the grate and he picked out Milly sitting on a sofa next to it. She was dressed all in black and sat very upright, staring into the flames. He smiled again and hurried over to sit next to her. She did not take her eyes off the fire.

‘I am so sorry,’ said Thomas. ‘If there had been any way I could have got to the funeral I would have done.’

Milly still did not look at him. ‘I put that plesiosaur tooth in with him. You know the one he found with Mary Anning in Lyme, his ‘first fossil’. I thought he would like that.’

‘That was a nice idea.’

‘I know he wasn’t a popular man at the Institute but you would have thought some of his colleagues would have turned up. Brompton Cemetery is not the back of beyond.’ She turned and looked at Thomas. Her beautiful, deep blue eyes had a film of water over them. ‘It was just cook, Simpson and I.’

‘I don’t know what to say. He was a great man, wise and gentle. One day I will prove that to the world. I promise.’

Milly took a long shuddering breath and studied Thomas’s face. ‘What did they do to you?’

Thomas touched his bruised nose. ‘Nothing really. This was my fault.’

‘I asked you not to get into trouble, Tom. I needed you.’

He reached forward took her hand. ‘I know. I know, but it turns out I was right, Milly. Your father was too. They think the Germans might have gone to the plateau.~~?~~ The Government wants me to investigate what happened to my father!’

Thomas noticed Milly did not seem to share his sense of triumph. She retrieved her hand and brushed her dress straight. ‘So?’

Thomas was confused. ‘What do you mean, “So”?’

‘So, what difference does it make? So the Germans are playing with dinosaurs in the Amazon.’

‘The War Office will listen to us now. We can warn them. Milly!’ He struggled with her lack of enthusiasm ‘I thought you’d be pleased… your father would be…’

Milly expression hardened. ‘It was important to you and Papa. But now he’s gone and I have had enough. I don’t believe a word of it and you’re wasting your time with it all. Have you any idea what it is like at the Front?’

She stood and Thomas realized tears were falling from her eyes, but she was not crying. ‘I have spent two years patching up bits of men. The Front tears them to pieces. It’s a meat-mincing machine out there. You throw living things into it and it chops them up and throws them back. Even if your dinosaurs existed I would feel sorry for them, because they are flesh and blood. They will end up bloated and stinking beside the road like so many horses have. There is no primeval threat that you could possibly describe that could match the man-made horror that is out there already. You cannot understand. You have never been there!’

Milly stood, shaking.

Thomas was shocked. He had not expected this at all from his gentle Milly. He tried to hold her, but she shook him off and walked to the other end of the room. Both were silent for a while.

He had to tell her the rest of his news. 'They want me to go on a mission to the Amazon.'

'Why you?' she snapped. 'You know nothing of the jungle. You know nothing of the world. Are you sure you didn't persuade them to take you?'

'You don't understand, Milly. I am vital to their plans,' he protested.

'Well, that's brilliant. You always wanted to be like your father and now at least you will disappear in the jungle like him.'

'That is not fair. You know it is about more than just him.'

Again there was a silence. Then she took a letter out of her pocket. 'If you are going to the plateau that makes this easier. I got a letter from an old friend of mine. She used to be at Mary's, but now she is at Number 41 Stationary Field Hospital near Amiens. They are desperate. This new offensive is brutal and they need as many medical staff as possible.'

She walked back to stand in front of him. 'Tom, I can't stay in this empty house for a day longer. I am not going back to Mary's. I am going to Flanders, where I know I can be of most use.'

Thomas' mind was in turmoil. He couldn't bear to think of her so close to the Front.

'Mills, you mustn't go there now. The Germans are breaking through … and they might use the creatures!'

'You haven't been listening, have you? You sound ridiculous. Your dinosaurs will be the least of my problems. Look, if you are so worried why don't you come with me? If you are right, they can't stop you serving in the field hospitals now and they are desperate

for doctors. At least it will stop you going on this stupid jaunt to the Amazon.'

It was as if this argument was inevitable. Thomas felt himself falling into it. Getting angrier and angrier with the woman he loved, but unable to stop himself. He clenched his fists and flushed. 'It's too dangerous. I forbid you to go!'

'You do what?! What century do you live in?'

'I insist you stay here.'

'Goddamit, Dr Challenger. Sometimes you sound so like your father! I knew this would happen.'

Thomas felt a wave of nausea as he realized Milly was reaching for her hand.

She pulled and tugged at their engagement ring.

'You are a pompous, overbearing ape. I could not possibly marry a man like you.' She prized the ring off her finger. 'Here! Have this bauble back and go on your pathetic adventure. I hope I never see you again.'

She threw the ring at him and strode out of the room.

Boiling with emotion Thomas didn't know what to do. He was mad with rage but, stronger than that, he was mortified at losing Milly. He wanted to somehow start the conversation again but, as he went to follow her, his way was blocked by Simpson.

'Forgive me, Doctor, but I think Ms Summerlee has retired to her bedroom,' he said.

Thomas was flushed and breathing heavily, his mind roiling at the injustice of it all. He looked up the stairs and caught himself in a mirror on the landing: the shock was visceral. There was his father. He remembered how those dreadful fits of temper had so frightened him and his mother when he was young. There was no bushy beard

but, he realized, the volatile old man lived on. He staggered back into the living room and slumped into an armchair.

Moments later Simpson appeared with a glass of water.

By now Thomas had calmed and accepted the drink gratefully. Simpson retrieved the ring from the corner of the room and gave it to him.

'Thank you, Simpson. I have made a complete hash of all this, haven't I? She is right. What am I doing heading off to Brazil? Can you talk to her?'

Simpson thought for a moment. 'You won't stop Miss Milly going to France and, if the Government has ordered you to go on an important mission, I would endeavor very hard to do what they say. What other course of action is there?'

Thomas shrugged. 'Volunteer for the Front? Do my duty?'

'It sounds like the War Office has decided what your duty is.'

Thomas sat and thought for a while. He knew Milly would be livid with him for days, while Creed would consider it treason not to get on the airship. 'They want me to persuade Lord John Roxton to come along.'

'I might be able to help a little there. The late Professor was concerned about his former expedition colleagues and had me keep an eye and ear out for Lord Roxton after he was invalided out. I think I know where he is… but you might not like what you find.'

Thomas stood and took a long breath. 'Well, I had better get on with it. There is an airship waiting for me in Southampton apparently.'

CHAPTER SEVEN

‘Baron! You’re like a great walrus,’ squealed the young blonde girl as he tried to kiss her on the cheek.

‘Come now, just one kiss,’ murmured Baron Otto Richter placing a firm hand on her thigh. He had forgotten her name but he was mildly irritated she was putting up such resistance to his advances.

The Baron’s Mercedes was parked on some raised ground, just outside Aachen. Ahead lay the German border with Belgium and safely a hundred miles beyond that -the Front. This was where the Biowaffen project had started and Richter felt most at home.

That morning he had spotted the waitress in a local café and had decided to treat her to lunch. When this had not elicited suitable gratitude, he resolved to lay on a small demonstration.

‘Please, Sir, I am engaged,’ she protested as she levered his hand from her leg.

He sighed and sat back in his seat. A little fear was what was needed and, if his calculations were right, that would be arriving at any moment.

‘Driver, how far are we from the facility?’ he asked.

‘Five and a half miles, Baron,’ replied his chauffeur from the front seat.

‘What do you do at that place anyway?’ said the girl. She was referring to the Biowaffen facility, a few miles out of town.

‘It is top secret I am afraid,’ he replied with his best ‘air-of-mystery’ voice.

‘Well, it stinks. I know that much.’

She was beginning to annoy him, so he ignored her and checked for the metal controller box he had brought with him. It was there beside him on the seat, a bulky device with several dials and switches on the front. He patted it and waited.

The Baron had landed the job of head of the Biowaffen unit four years before through family connections and, since then, he had had a good war. The secrecy of the project, and the difficulty of the research made accountability almost impossible, which suited him just fine. Each time his superiors showed an interest he would lay on a 'spectacular' and promise them a breakthrough was just round the corner.

However, recently, he had started to sense change. There was an air of desperation around this spring offensive and he worried his good fortune could not last.

'My finger hurts,' whined the waitress. 'Where you pricked it with your badge.'

It was late afternoon and the Baron was getting impatient so he decided he would give it one more go. Without warning he reached across and grabbed her waist with one arm and clutched one of her breasts with the other.

If he believed she would at last yield to his masculine charms, he could not have been more wrong. With surprising strength for one so small, the girl shoved her forearm into his throat and brought a knee up into his groin.

He lurched backwards with a yelp, sending the control box tumbling off the seat and out of the open door. 'You ungrateful little bitch! I will have you sacked for this,' groaned the Baron as he writhed in pain. 'I will make sure your fiancée is sent …'

'Baron! Look!' shouted the driver from the front. 'It's here.'

Richter looked out the front window and saw a dark sleek shape making its way swiftly up the hill.

Forgetting his pain, he searched around for the control box.

'Blast and damn where is it?' then he looked out the door and there, on the road, lay the metal device. The Baron felt a lurch on panic. He stumbled out and picked it up. It was smashed beyond repair.

His mouth went dry and his hands began to shake. His little demonstration was about to go horribly wrong. He looked down the hill to where a vicious dog-like creature had stopped and was sniffing the air. It was about seven foot long with a muscular black body. Its scaly skin shone in the afternoon sun beneath a sparse covering of thick bristles. Its head carried tiny black eyes, flared nostrils and powerful jaws equipped with drool-covered sabre teeth.

A couple of hours before Richter had wafted the girl's blood-stained handkerchief in front of its highly developed nostrils. He had then ordered it to be released shortly after he left for his drive in the country. Like a demon bloodhound it had followed their scent for five miles. The plan had been to scare her a bit. He would then save the day with his control box that would subdue it by activating a neural clamp implanted in its brain. He would then appear the knight in shining armour, a powerful man in control. She would be suitably impressed and he would be suitably rewarded.

That was the plan. But now the plan lay in pieces like the control box.

'Shoot it!' he shouted at his driver.

'What? Me?!' came the reply.

'Yes. You. You have a pistol, don't you? Shoot it. *Now*!'

The driver climbed out of the car just as Richter clambered back in and slammed the door.

'Get away from me,' whimpered the girl. 'Where is the driver going?'

'Shut up, woman,' snapped Richter as he watched the driver advance towards the creature. He raised his Luger.

Suddenly the creature stopped sniffing and darted forward.

The driver fired several times, but it didn't even flinch. As he realised the danger he tried to turn and run.

The beast leapt, riding him to the ground. In a series of swift movements it clamped its huge jaws over his head and flexed its neck muscles.

The driver let out a single strangled cry and was dead.

'I want to get out of here,' sobbed the girl.

Richter was sweating now. He crawled awkwardly into the front seat only to discover the driver had taken the keys with him. His mind raced. The driver's corpse, which the animal was now tearing at, had bought him a few minutes, but it would not be enough to get away.

He looked back at the girl. It was her it was hunting. She was his ticket out of this scrape.

Just as he was considering how to most efficiently abandon her, he heard another car approaching up the hill. It was a grey Mercedes staff car like his, pulling a covered trailer. As it reached the feasting creature it did not stop but skirted round the incident and continued until it reached the Baron's parked car.

Three Biowaffen handlers in red uniforms jumped out. Two carried ridged choke leads and the other a control box. As they walked down towards the creature the handler turned on the control box and twisted the dial.

Instantly the animal staggered away from the dead driver and its legs crumbled.

Richter looked back at the staff car and out climbed the fourth passenger. It was Captain Von Heket.

He saluted smartly. 'Are you hurt, Sir?'

Richter got out and straightened his hair. ‘No, thankfully. If it had not been for my courageous driver, I don’t know what would have happened.’

‘Indeed. It looks like it was a close escape. I will investigate how the gorgonopsid got out. Someone will pay for this.’

They watched as the others manhandled the creature into the trailer. One of the men threw the driver’s car keys to Von Heket.

‘Baron, you have had a terrible experience. With your permission I will drive you back.’

Then he opened the back door of the car. ‘Ms Klein? You are late for afternoon teas. Please go back in the other car with my handlers before you get into trouble. They will get to Aachen before us.’

The terrified and bemused girl gratefully scrabbled out of one car and into the other.

In silence the two officers watched as the other car drove away.

Richter was just calculating how he could bluff his way out of the situation when Von Heket spoke. ‘Sir, we have had another breach of security – a British spy at our hatchery in Emmendingen.’

‘What? Again!’ said the Baron, recovering his composure.

‘It is the first at the Black Forest. However, ~~and,~~ as with the breaches at Aachen and Cambrai, I made sure the incident was contained.’

‘Where is he now? We need to question him and find out how much they know.’

‘Dead, I am afraid. My concern is that they know enough about us to keep trying. Sooner or later they are going to succeed.’

Richter affected his most thoughtful nod. ‘And your recommendation?’

‘We need to let the Generals know. They need to decide the next steps.’

‘What! Are you sure? I mean … you know. They don’t really understand this technology,‘ stammered Richter. ‘My sources tell me our recent demonstration at St Quentin was very well received. So, no, I cannot agree to stirring up a hornets nest over just one spy. Besides, I am sure that with the spring offensive the generals have enough on their plate.’

‘Sir. There is a telegram from the Chief of Staff in your office.’

Richter started to climb back into the car. ‘Oh, it’s probably some accountants meeting. I will let you deal with it.’

‘It is from General Ludendorff himself… Sir.’

CHAPTER EIGHT

Thomas Challenger and the Summerlee’s butler, Simpson, stood looking at the mansion in front of them. Together they had walked down from Notting Hill in search of the address Simpson had for Lord Roxton. It was a fine, detached building made of yellow brick and stone. Three stories high, with large windows on all four sides, it should have been the envy of anyone in West London. But this area of Holland Park was hopelessly run down. The house itself had broken gutters, meaning one wall ran green with algae. Buddleia grew from cracks in the portico and paint peeled off every broken sash.

‘Why on earth would Roxton leave a fine apartment in Albany for here?’ asked Thomas.

‘Who knows, sir? But his Lordship has done a lot of strange things since he was invalided out after Le Cateau.’

‘Better get on with this,’ said Thomas. ‘I only have 36 hours to be on that airship, with or without ~~my~~ Lord Roxton.’

They mounted the steps to the moldy front door. There was no knocker or bell but, as he tried to strike it, it swung open. The latch was missing.

The hall was dimly lit and the walls were covered with the memorabilia of a sporting life. Trophies cluttered shelves; a pair of boxing gloves hung among prints of sportsmen and, over the stairs, jutted the sad head of a white rhino.

It the middle of the room was a stout, middle-aged woman hurriedly pulling on a large fur coat. The woman looked up as they entered, just as a voice roared out from upstairs, ‘Top of the mornin’!’ and there was the sound of smashing glass

The woman flinched. ‘Are you here to arrest him?’ she whispered. LOL

‘No. We are friends of Lord Roxton’s. Is he here?’ Thomas whispered back, although he wasn’t quite sure why.

‘He is mad. Mad and dangerous. I should never have come.’ So saying she barged out in a cloud of lavender and mothballs.

The man’s voice bellowed again ‘Fraud!’

‘Lord Roxton!’ Thomas shouted. There was no response so he started to walk up the stairs. As he stepped his feet crunched. He looked about and discovered the stairs were covered in small pieces of broken glass. He bent down and picked up a bottle label, which read ‘Forced March’. Suddenly something smashed against the wall above him and showered down more glass.

‘Lord Roxton!’ he shouted again as he hurried to the landing. It opened out into a large first floor reception room. In the dim light that crept in around the torn curtains, he could just make out a richly decorated room. The floor was covered in worn red carpets and most of the black antique furniture had been pushed to the side. On almost every flat surface sat empty wine and spirit bottles.

At the far end stood a striking man dressed in just his long johns and a silk kimono. He held a tennis racket in one hand and a small bottle in the other.

‘Out the way young’un, there’s a fat old woman out there who masquerades as a medium!’ He tossed up the bottle and swiped it straight at Thomas.

He ducked and it smashed into the wall behind.

‘Lord John, it’s Thomas … Thomas Challenger! She just ran out the front door.’

‘Good riddance. Claimed she was talkin’ to Malone. ‘Cept he turned into a bloody leprechaun!’

‘I just wanted a few words’

Roxton picked up a large glass of brandy and took a swig. He stood for a moment swaying and looking at Thomas.

He was just as Thomas remembered him; a strong sinewy man with swarthy skin and dark, thinning hair. His prominent nose and bushy eyebrows hid his eyes in the dim light of the room, but Thomas could feel his gaze.

‘What’s that? Challenger you say. Dead years ago I’m afraid. Not here! If you want to talk to him ask that charlatan that just ran out!’

Thomas edged into the room while Simpson hung back on the landing.

‘I know,’ said Thomas, ‘I am his son. We met five years ago when my father announced he was returning to the Amazon. At Wigmore Hall.’

‘Had some good times with your father, young fella. Those were the days! Of course, the man was a complete idiot to go back by himself. Told him to his face, so I don’t mind tellin’ you. I said he had nothin’ to prove, but he was such a stubborn old mule. Went on and on about his legacy, about how much more there was to do. All about science. Science this and science that. Not surprised no one wanted to go with him. Such a difficult man. Drove poor Jessie to an early grave if you ask me …’

‘I am very familiar with my father’s character… and I think you’ll find my mother died of pneumonia!’

Suddenly Roxton stopped and looked at Thomas, as if for the first time. His face was flushed but his piercing blue eyes had become distant and unfocussed. Thomas noticed the grey in his hair and the lines on his face. Despite his wild energy, he had aged since they last met.

‘I’m sorry lad. Why are you here?’

‘I am here because the War Office wants to organise an expedition to return to the Japura Plateau. They have evidence the Germans have been using creatures against our boys on the Front and believe they sourced them from the plateau.’

Roxton’s brow furrowed and, as Thomas talked, he started repeating the words ‘The devil they have … the devil they have…’

‘They want us to go back with a team to find out what has been going on in the Amazon. Major Creed wants us …’

Roxton’s expression suddenly darkened. His eyes bulged and blood vessels appeared on his temples.

‘Creed! Eddie Creed,’ he roared. ‘Did you just say Creed is the reason you are here?!’

Roxton swung round and ran to the other end of the room. He reached down behind a sofa and pulled out what looked like an elephant gun. With surprising dexterity for his agitated state he swiftly loaded two cartridges and, almost before Thomas realized the danger he was in, was lifting and aiming it.

Thomas dived out of the door and rolled onto the landing. An immense blast echoed through the house and bits of plaster and dust filled the stairwell. Thomas looked up and, through the new hole in the wall, saw Roxton heading towards him. He scrabbled down the stairs and headed for the front door with Roxton shouting after him ‘Give Creed this message!’ from the first floor.

He reached the door expecting another blast at any moment but, strangely, none came. He yanked the door open and was about to flee when he realized everything had gone silent. Tentatively he peered back round the door. Roxton lay slumped over the bannisters and behind stood Simpson.

‘What on earth have you done?’ exclaimed Thomas.

‘Forgive me, Dr Challenger, but it seemed to me that your life was somewhat threatened and that Lord Roxton might be about to do something he would later regret. So I took the liberty of rendering him unconscious.’

Thomas came back into the house and walked up the stairs. ‘Thank you. I can see why Creed didn’t want to approach him.’

Together they lifted Roxton up and laid him flat on the floor.

Thomas examined his pupils. ‘Alcohol and cocaine are a pretty toxic mix, even for a man of his strength.’ He turned to Simpson. ‘He mentioned Malone. What did happen to Edward Malone?’

‘After they returned from the plateau his Lordship and Malone became close friends. Inseparable. They even joined up together. But the war tore them apart like so many. Roxton was injured and invalided out at Le Cateau. Malone went missing at the Somme. My guess is his Lordship has yet to come to terms with it.’

Thomas looked round at the house full of its memorabilia; record of a life fully lived, testament to someone who would expect a glorious end. Then he looked down at the once great man, lying on the floor on a dirty carpet, unconscious after his drug-fuelled rant.

‘Time is getting on, Sir,’ said Simpson. ‘You had better start for Southampton. I will make sure his Lordship is comfortable.’

Thomas sighed. ‘He is the only man alive who has been to the plateau before.’

‘But he’s a liability.’

‘I will vouch for him. He is coming with me to Southampton.’

CHAPTER NINE

‘Milly! Milly! Milly!’ squealed an ample, ginger-haired woman standing in the entrance to the tent.

Milly Summerlee swung round, a smile igniting on her face. ‘Harry! You big Ozzy beaut!’

The two women hugged and even managed to jump up and down in the confines of the bell tent. Harriet Brightly was a broad-shouldered farmer’s daughter from the Queensland outback and one of the most determined and resourceful people Milly had ever known. They had met during training in London and stayed in touch even after Harriet was shipped out to Amiens. She was a breath of fresh new world air in a stagnant European war.

Harriet pulled away and looked Milly up and down. ‘God, you’re as beautiful as ever. As I always said “if I were a man…”’ Then her face darkened slightly. ‘Sorry to hear about your Dad.’

She let her shoulders drop and sat heavily on the bunk. ‘It’s hard as shit out here at the moment Mills. I shouldn’t have asked you to come.’

‘I couldn’t leave my friends to have all the fun.’

‘I’m serious.’

‘So am I. I know it will be hard, but I needed this and will always be grateful to you for fixing it for me. Now, look what I’ve brought with me.’

Milly turned to the suitcase on her camp bed and flipped open the lid. Harriet huddled over next to her. ‘From your letters I knew exactly what would be needed. Tea, fruit cake, Fortnum and Mason jam, hot water bottled, chocolate …’

‘Oh, chocolate!’ drooled Harriet. ‘I must have a piece. Gimme, gimme, now!’

Milly cracked off a row and handed it over.

Harriet sat next to the suitcase, closed her eyes and popped the sweet in her mouth. Between slurps and gulps she mumbled to Milly. 'It's got so intense. Mmm, heaven. We don't have the frost, but it is wetter and the numbers of casualties are just unbelievable. Mmmmm. The Hun offensive has hit this sector hard and they're getting closer. We have been shelled here. They are throwing everything at us. We had four hundred through here yesterday. Any more chocolate?'

'I'm gonna save it. Sounds like we will need it.'

'Ew! What's this?' said Harriet pulling a dirty, man's handkerchief out of the suitcase.

Milly quickly snatched it out of her hand. 'Just my hanky,' and she pretended to blow her nose before thrusting it into an inside pocket.

Harriet just raised an eyebrow and shrugged.

Outside the tent the sound of trucks arriving and shouting orderlies told them that more casualties were arriving. Harriet stood and sighed.

'How much sleep did you get last night?' asked Milly.

'Two hours. Just slept in my clothes. Warmer anyway. But hell, still got all my limbs!'

Milly pulled on her rubber boots and straightened her apron. 'This is where I want to be Harry,' she said firmly.

Harry clasped Milly's hand and they walked out onto the muddy path that led from the nurses' quarters to the ward and op tents. Milly's Stationary Field Hospital sat just east of Amiens on the road to Villers-Bretonneux. There was row after row of dirty white tents in all directions. A web of guide ropes and mud meant there were only a few navigable paths across the site and they were crowded with stretcher-bearers, medics, nurses and walking wounded.

‘Have you reported to Matron yet?’

‘Yes, I’m in Ward B apparently.’

‘It’s just over there,’ Harriet said pointing. ‘Lot of gas victims there. I will be joining you tonight. Until then I’m in the op tent, glad I’ve got my boots on. Bye, lovely girl.’

Harriet peeled off and disappeared into the crowd. As Milly headed towards the large ward tents she passed a huge crater filled with water. She looked up to the eastern horizon and, for the first time, noticed the columns of smoke. The Front was closer than she had thought.

She hurried on to Ward B. Outside she paused, taking in the heady odor of disinfectant, ether and gangrene. She checked her hair was tidily pinned behind her cap and headed in.

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It didn’t take long for Milly to pick up the routine but it was desperate, emotionally-draining work. The worst part was knowing she could do so much better if only she had more time with a patient, or more equipment. It was hour after hour of doing her best in appalling circumstances.

Early evening, two days later, Harriet rejoined Milly in Ward B. Casualties had been pouring in all day. The beds were full. Even the places between the beds had the wounded lying on stretchers. Milly had spent the entire day lost in the struggle to clean, care and cope. Just as she finished bandaging one patient’s wound several more would be waiting.

Harriet wandered past Milly and gave her shoulders a quick squeeze. ‘There’s been no new causalities in the op tent for a couple of hours. I think things are calming down out there.’ She moved off to help hold down a man who was thrashing about in his bed.

After an hour or so Milly's shift ended and she sought out Harriet who was sitting listening to a badly injured young man mumbling fitfully.

She looked up as Milly approached and shook her head.

'You look shattered,' she said.

'I have never been so tired in my life. There was a lad this morning though who was so grateful it was almost embarrassing. Sweet. What's up with this one?'

'It's not his body I worry about, his brain's been scrabbled,' said Harriet tapping her finger on her temple.

Milly looked down at a pale faced Tommy. He had been given a dose of morphine and was drifting in and out of a stupor.

'No, Sarg, no sarg. Run!' he muttered.

'Keeps talking about demons and devils. Monsters and fiends. Queer thing is there are another couple over there that seem to share the same nightmare.'

Milly sat as the soldier drifted back into consciousness. His eyes flickered open and he focused on her. His eyes widened in fear.

'Shhh. You're safe now. No nightmare demons here,' said Milly.

He gripped her hand. 'It was no nightmare, Miss. All teeth and claws. Scales and horns. Ate Sarg in front of my eyes. Mark my words, the Hun have the Devil on their side!'

Milly was caught by the man's intensity. She looked at Harriet.

'You know there is a rumor that the Germans are using some sort of hallucinogenic gas. Got them all seeing monsters.'

Milly shivered. Suddenly Thomas' warning came back to her. At the thought of him, she felt an involuntary sob grow in her chest.

‘Excuse me, I need some air,’ she said standing quickly. She stumbled out of the ward tent into the clear night air and took some deep breaths. She must have been even more tired than she thought.

She set off across the field hospital, trying to clear her mind. Suddenly she wanted to start another shift. She wanted to be working rather than thinking about Thomas. His ideas about dinosaurs were ridiculous and she had been right to give him some home truths. But the young soldier’s terror had affected her and she was scared she just might have been unfair to Thomas. He had looked so confused and hurt.

Without intending to she found herself standing in the auto-ambulance yard. In front of her was a battered green Siddeley-Deasy, which had just dropped off its casualties. The RAMCs were preparing to take it back to the Front. In a moment, she knew she had to find out for herself. Ludicrous as it all sounded if there was some truth in what Thomas had said she would have to know. She could not face going back to her tent and lying awake.

She waited until the driver and medic had climbed into the cab and then she slipped across the yard and jumped into the back.

The engine gunned and the truck began to move. Milly held her breath.

Just as they began to accelerate a flurry of blue serge, white apron and ginger hair flew into the back beside her.

‘Strewth girl!’ said Harriet. ‘I know it has been a tough day but is this really the answer?’

‘Harry! You must go back. You’ll get into the most awful trouble.’

‘Oh and they will, of course, forgive Miss Goodie-Two-Shoes ‘ere. Milly, tell me, what’s going on.’

Milly looked out the back of the truck. The sun had almost set and, as the lights of the field hospital disappeared into the distance, darkness was flooding in around them. She still felt silly talking about monsters, so she just shrugged.

'I need some answers Harry and I will only find them at the Front.'

'Do you think it is possible to find them tonight? Not because I am worried about being shelled, I just don't fancy facing Sister if we are late tomorrow morning.'

Milly smiled. 'You are a real tonic, you know that Harriet Brightly. By the way, do you know where this ambulance might be heading?'

'Oh, that's easy. In this sector the Hun are concentrating everything on taking a desperate little town called Villers-Bretonneux.'

'Then I hope that is where I can find what I am looking for.'

'You didn't bring any of the chocolate did you Mills?'

CHAPTER TEN

Baron Otto Richter watched the rain trickle down the windowpane in front of him. The water splintered the light from the damp streets and buildings beyond. The Belgian town of Spa looked miserable as unseasonal wind was thrashing the leaves off the trees and the flowerbeds had been crushed under the wheels of heavy vehicles. It had taken him two days to get here; the roads choked with men and machines. Despite the huge effort that had gone into the spring

offensive, rumours were everywhere that, despite initial breakthroughs, it was stalling. In every town Richter heard talk of strikes and mutinies. There was mounting pressure on the generals to provide a quick victory and they were making sure everyone else felt it too.

Quartermaster General Erich Ludendorff, the architect of this strategy, sat in the next room and Richter was terrified. He turned and looked at the large gilt doors at the end of the room. Beyond, he knew, they were discussing his fate. With his natural optimism, he hoped they would agree he had done his best under extremely difficult circumstances and, reluctantly, wind down the Unit. But deep down he knew it did not look good - five years, thousands of desperately needed marks and a only handful of attacks to show for it all: with mixed success. He had promised wholescale panic and a massive propaganda coup, but the enemy was still there.

He felt a new wave of anxiety and turned to Von Heket, who was sitting calmly on an ornate chair in the corner. 'Do you think they heard about the spy anyway? That could be why they have called this meeting. Don't you think?'

Von Heket shrugged. 'Maybe.'

Richter continued to fret. 'Are you sure we can't field more animals?'

Von Heket smoothed down his jet-black hair and puffed his cheeks the way he always did when he was about to talk down to the Baron. 'These are not planes or tanks. You cannot throw them into battle without careful preparation.'

'I know, you have told me a hundred times. But surely we have grown enough after five years for more than a few tactical strikes? I mean, what have you been up to at that Black Forest facility.'

'We have been through all this, Baron. Hochburg Castle is just a breeding site for young animals. If we release too many juvenile or

unclamped animals it could be a disaster. They would most likely head back to our lines and eat our own troops.'

Von Heket got up and came close to the Baron. 'Courage, Sir. You know these creatures better than anyone. You must go in there and give Ludendorff the benefit of your extensive experience. These are generals. They have led us for four years and they are not stupid. They will expect you to be straight with them. If you bluster they will see through you.'

Somehow none of this made Richter feel any better.

Von Heket held up a thick file. 'As ever, I will be there to support you. Just refer to me if you need any details.'

The doors opened and a staffer invited them to join the meeting. In front was a huge room, which Richter assumed was once the hotel ballroom. Three grand chandeliers hung from the ceiling and brightly coloured cherubs clustered in the high corners. However, the scene below was a far cry from the gay delights for which the room was originally designed. The ornate walls were covered in dark maps of troop movements. Where once elegant dancers would have swirled and stepped, now staffers in fatigues scurried back and forth to the music of tickertape machines and typewriters.

At the far end was a large wooden table surrounded by officers. As Richter walked in his legs felt weak. Seated at the end of the table he recognised Ludendorff.

He looked up as the Baron approached, his eyes were dark ringed and watery with lack of sleep.

Richter smiled weakly, but the General just scowled and signalled his adjutant.

Two chairs were brought forward and he was invited to sit with his captain. On the table were stacks of papers and several folders with the Biowaffen logo printed on the front.

Ludendorff studied Richter but said nothing. Instead, a small, weasel-faced man stood up and addressed him.

'Thank you, Baron Richter for coming here today. I am General Axel Burloff and I have been responsible for preparing a report on your unit for the High Command over the last six months.'

Richter was dumbfounded. He hadn't heard of the man, still less read the name Burloff on any of the correspondence that had crossed his desk. How could he possibly have prepared a report without him knowing?

Richter was about to respond but Burloff ignored him. 'The purpose of this meeting is to establish whether the role of the Imperial Biowaffen Unit is being effectively prosecuted and whether, after five years of investment, it has met its strategic aims. You were appointed head of the unit in October 1914? Am I right?'

'Yes, but I must ...'

'Despite no previous experience of administration at this level.'

'That is not true. I hold a zoology degree from Heidelberg and was serving at …'

'Baron, may I start by asking a simple question. Do you know how much money has been invested in your unit since you took over?'

'Ah … I think we can provide that.' Richter turned to Von Heket who was rifling through his papers.

'I hope so,' sighed Burloff, 'otherwise it is going to be a very long meeting.'

Richter's mouth was dry, but he managed to tut at Von Heket for taking a while to find the right piece of paper. When he handed it over it was covered in a reassuringly large number of columns with ingoings, outgoings and balances. Richter coughed and pretended to be deciphering the ledger.

Von Heket lent forward and drew his attention to a figure, two up in the bottom right hand corner.

'Yes, of course. Over the last four years the investment is one hundred and fifty thousand marks two hundred and …' Richter stalled; there seemed to be too many pfennigs.

Burloff snorted. 'I think you are struggling to find a figure of around 15 million marks.'

Richter could not hide his shock. He couldn't conceive of where such a large amount of money had gone.

'General. These are not the accounts I am familiar with - this is the first time I have seen such a figure. I shall order an immediate enquiry, someone must have been …'

'And, after pouring 15 million marks into this venture, are you now ready to unleash an army of neurologically-controlled monsters on the hapless enemy?'

'Sir, we are very close, but these are not assembly line machines like planes or tanks. You cannot throw them into battle without careful preparation. If you like we can arrange a demonstration of one of our most powerful animals.'

'Enough!' cried Burloff slamming his hand on the desk. He turned to Ludendorff. 'General, Baron Richter here is demonstrating such staggering ineptitude that I recommend we abandon the formal nature of this meeting and get straight to the point.'

Ludendorff nodded almost imperceptibly.

Burloff continued. 'Baron, you may not have noticed while chasing woman around the countryside, but we are in the middle of a spring offensive upon which the very outcome of the war depends. There is no time for fine-tuning, for tweaking and improving. Can you and your unit come to the aid of your country now that, at last, she has called on you?'

Richter was shaking. He looked to Von Heket, but he was staring down at his papers. He so wanted to stand and shout, 'Yes! We will strike hard and fast at the heart of the enemy,' but every report from Von Heket warned against it. For ordinary German troops to have their own secret weapon turn on them would be the final straw and he, Richter, would be blamed. Somewhere inside he found some resolve.

'I am sorry General, but I cannot sanction such a move. Without more preparation the danger to our own troops would be unacceptable.'

Burloff considered his response. 'Unacceptable? Captain Von Heket, do you agree with this assessment?'

Von Heket looked a little surprised to be asked and then stood and coughed rather formally.

Richter felt sorry for the poor chap, suddenly thrust into the firing line.

'With all due respect I do not, General. Our recently established facility outside Cambrai has had considerable success, albeit at a limited tactical level, and has been key to at least two strategic gains during Operation Michael. The giant invertebrates being particularly notable in the towns in close quarter street fighting. It is all there in the reports you have before you. At this time, besides our Cambrai operations, we also have large populations of trained animals ready for deployment at our facility near Aachen.'

'Can you explain why your assessment differs so radically from Baron Richter's?'

'No, Sir. As I say, it is all in the reports I have provided.'

Richter stared at Von Heket. 'You lying eel. How dare you stand there and pretend we are ready to deploy. I trusted you ...'

Burloff cut him off. ‘Not another word Baron. No, be quiet, now. It seems just as you failed to read the accounts, you failed to read Captain Von Heket’s reports. I have here a file ten inches thick describing the increasingly reliable activities of your creatures with detailed reports going back two years.’

Richter appealed to Ludendorff. ‘General? Sir, this man is lying to save his skin. I promise you it will be a disaster.’

Ludendorff at last spoke. ‘A disaster? Then what on earth have you been doing all these years? You are a disgrace.’

Richter’s mouth opened and shut but no sound came out.

‘I have heard enough. Burloff, you deal with him. And, Captain Von Heket, I trust you will make good on your promises. I want action now. Do you understand? Now!’

At that the Quartermaster General rose and, together with most of the other generals, left the room.

Burloff signalled to two soldiers standing at the door. ‘Baron, you are hereby stripped of your position. You will be placed under house arrest until we can work out what to do with you. Get him out of my sight before he starts shouting.’

Richter did indeed start shouting and struggled to attack Von Heket. But the soldiers were strong and he was soon dragged from the room.

Burloff waited until the noise and commotion had died down.

‘Now, Captain,’ he said, ‘congratulations. Not for the rather crude way you just betrayed the Baron… Well done for making us all believe for so long that an idiot like Richter was capable of anything. You are now working for me and I want to start seeing results. Rather than just small tactical raids, I want to see mass attacks. Something that will make the Americans think twice about their decision to join. Something that will fire up our troops.’

‘I am sure you will see a good return on your investment, General.’

Burloff smiled and then picked up a file off the table. ‘Unlike that idiot Richter, I want to see this for myself. You will find me a very different sort of master, Von Heket. And, just so we are clear, I don’t trust you or like you. But we have a job to do, so let’s get on with it.’

‘Then may I suggest an immediate visit to one of our facilities, Sir. Aachen, or the Black Forest?’

‘And why didn’t you suggest Cambrai ?’ asked Burloff. ‘I won’t be led a merry dance by you. Cambrai it is..’

Von Heket snapped to attention and, only after Burloff left, did he afford himself a small smile.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A bright white full moon hung just above the horizon and lit a sparkling path across the waves towards the airship. Thomas sat

looking out of the large windows in the rear gondola of the R34. He had never flown before and had found the whole experience extraordinary. It was like magic. Below he could see the lights of large cruiser blinking in the vastness of the dark ocean. He felt like a character out of Peter Pan and, at least for a while, could forget his troubles at home.
He let the moment wash over him. He was 3000 feet above the Atlantic in a giant dirigible labouring its way towards a plateau full of extinct marvels. The lives of many thousands of men rested on the success of their mission and there was a high chance he may not make it back. At last, he was going to do his bit. In the meantime he could perhaps have done without the shuddering vibration of the two giant Sunbeam engines droning away behind the cabin and the loud snoring of Lord John Roxton who was lying on the floor.

Despite vigorous objections from Captain Gregory, Thomas had managed to bundle the unconscious Lord onto the airship in Southampton. Surprisingly, he was helped by the presence of Simpson, who it turned out had served with Gregory and whose opinion he seemed to respect. Still, he had had to promise to control Roxton. Something he was confident he would be able to achieve as long as he remained asleep.

The airship lurched and Roxton rolled onto his back. He let out an enormous snort and then fell silent.

At the same time Corporal Roberts, who was sleeping on a thin bench, was tipped on to the floor. On waking to find herself face to face with the snorting Lord she scrabbled quickly to her feet.

She yawned and started a series of stretches.

Thomas nodded at her and held up an object that was sitting on the seat next to him.

‘While everyone was asleep I was wandering round and found some very strange cargo. You don’t know what this magazine is from, do

you?' Thomas held a drum packed with bullets. 'It's not from any machine gun I know.'

Roberts gave him a tight smile. 'I'm a zoologist remember. I suggest you ask Gregory.'

'Must have nicked that off the Hun,' came a gruff voice from the floor. Roxton was sitting up rubbing his head. 'Machine pistol magazine. MP 18, lads call it a trench sweep. Still, won't stop a large animal unless you hit something vital, only 9mm rounds.'

'Lord Roxton! You're back with us. How is the head?'

'Fine. Hearts goin' like a steam engine though, since you ask.' His forehead was covered in beads of sweat. 'Where the bloody hell am I?'

'About 30 hours from the Brazilian coast by my reckoning.'

Roxton stood unsteadily and then gripped the window frames in alarm. 'Christ! I hate airships. What have you got me into Challenger? If Creed is behind this I am gettin' off at the first stop.'

Thomas took a large breath. It was a speech he had been practicing since they left Southampton. 'Listen. As I tried to explain in your house, the Germans have taken your discovery, my father's discovery, and they are … corrupting it. Because we never followed up on your expedition it left the plateau wide open for them. Creed recognises they made a mistake ignoring the warning signs and now, at last, he is desperate to stop it. We are going back to put things right.'

Roxton took this all in and then shut his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose. 'Hold on. So this is Major Edward Creed you are talkin' about …?'

'I know. I know how his articles damaged your reputation before the war, but that is in the past.'

‘It’s nothin’ to do with that, young ‘un. He is a spy and nothin’ he ever does is straightforward. If he says he’s your best friend, it would be wise to assume he is about to stab you in the back. Who else is on this mission?’

‘Well, besides the airship crew, there are about 30 soldiers billeted along the central keel corridor above us, led by a Captain Alec Gregory. Also there is Corporal Roberts here who has a working knowledge of zoology. We are the only two scientists.’

Roberts stepped forward. ‘Delighted to meet you, Lord Roxton.’

‘Good Lord, are you a filly?! What kind of expedition is this?’

‘I can understand your reservations, my Lord, but she comes very highly recommended and from what I have …’

‘I can assure you, this “filly” can look after herself,’ interrupted Roberts. ‘I was brought up in Burma and know how to survive in the jungle.’

Roxton open and shut his mouth, then turned and started banging his head on the gondola window.

Roberts glanced nervously at Thomas.

After a moment Roxton stopped and clapped his hands. ‘Right, if you will excuse me, I am just nipping upstairs.’

He grasped the ladder and climbed up into the body of the airship.

‘Lord Roxton, I did promise you would not cause any trouble,’ Thomas shouted after him.

Roxton let out a loud laugh and disappeared.

Thomas hurried up after him and arrived in the long keel corridor. Like some upside-down whale skeleton, metal girders rose up from a central walkway. On either side soldiers lay in hammocks with their packs of equipment stashed beneath them. Roxton was standing

next to one of them inspecting the man's rifle; several nearby were looking at the Lord suspiciously. They were one of the surliest group of men Thomas had ever seen.

He was about to go and try and drag Roxton away when something remarkable happened. Roxton waggled his hand and made a gesture to his bottom. The man his was talking to burst out laughing. Soon other men round him were smiling and laughing. Gradually more joined them and Roxton charmed them all with his banter.

In that moment Thomas felt he understood Roxton better than if he had talked to him for days. His life was dominated by comradeship. Invalided in London, left alive while all his friends were being killed had been a living death to him. Now he was back amongst his own – fighting men, who understood him as he understood them - he was at ease.

The chat went on for a few minutes before Captain Gregory appeared from the forward gondola.

Instantly the knot of men dispersed and the atmosphere chilled.

Gregory walked up to Roxton until his face was only inches from his.

'Like two silver backs facing off,' whispered Roberts in Thomas' ear.

He hurried down the walkway to defuse the situation.

Gregory was in mid flow. 'For the record I never wanted a useless shit like you on this mission. You're too old, you drink too much and that sodding limp of yours will slow us down. And you, Challenger,' Gregory turned and glared at him before he had a chance to speak, 'have no bloody fighting experience at all. In fact, if I wasn't so confident you two bastards will be dead within hours of us arriving I would throw you out now. When you get stuck in the shit we will not help you. Do I make myself clear?'

'Like the peal of a church bell,' said Roxton. 'And may I compliment you on your use of vernacular. By the way, do you use wax on that

moustache or does it naturally stick up like that?'

Involuntarily, the soldier next to them sniggered.

Gregory threw him a foul look and Thomas seized the opportunity to lead Roxton back to the aft gondola.

Gregory glowered after them.

'Why are you antagonising him?' hissed Thomas

'Well, someone has to tell him he's an idiot. You don't have to be a bully to lead men,' said Roxton.

They climbed back down the ladder and, for a while, Roxton, just stared out of the window. The moon had disappeared and the black sky was filled with a glorious rash of bright stars.

'Be a dear, Corporal, and get me a drink of water. My throat's parched,' said Roxton.

Roberts began to protest, but a look from Thomas persuaded her to ascend the ladder again.

Roxton moved closer to Thomas. 'Clever that Creed chap. He knew you'd grab this opportunity to visit the plateau without asking too many questions and guessed you might be able to persuade me to come along for the ride.'

'And?' said Thomas.

'Those men up there are pulled together from all sorts of regiments. They wear no badges, but one thing unites them all. Thieves, deserters, dissenters, you name it. They were all for the high jump until they signed up to this mission.'

'What are you trying to say?'

'This isn't a science expedition or a commando raid. It smells more like a suicide mission, young-fella-my-lad.'

‘That is ridiculous! This mission is vital to the war effort.’

‘Oh, I am sure it is. Creed would love to muck up whatever the Germans are doin’ on the plateau. But I don’t think he is expectin’ anyone to come back and tell the tale. ’

Roberts climbed back down into the gondola with a water bottle.

‘Bless you, Corporal,’ said Roxton and then winked at Thomas. ‘Roberts, did your father give you permission to come on this mission?’

Roberts’ eyes narrowed.

Thomas could see her patience with the blustering Lord was wearing thin. He had only known her for a couple of days, but already he had learnt she could hold her own with the other men.

‘If you want to know, Sir, I never knew my parents,’ she replied. ‘My Grandmother brought me up in the Chittagong Hills. She tutored me …’

‘Thank you. All very interestin’,’ interrupted Roxton putting his arm round Thomas and leading him away to the other end of the gondola.

‘So, an orphan from the colonies. See, Thomas?’ he hissed.

‘What do you mean exactly?’

‘Nobody will miss us. Certainly not me. All my old sweats from the club and Albany are dead. What about you Thomas?’

Thomas felt for the engagement ring in his pocket and said nothing.

‘No one to ask Creed any awkward questions?’ Roxton probed.

‘Well, actually I do. Milly Summerlee is my fiancée,’ Thomas lied.

Roxton raised his eyebrows. ‘Lucky you. She was a beauty if I remember rightly. Well, as long as Creed doesn’t have her killed,

maybe someone will mourn us. That Gregory, I haven't worked him out yet. Stinks of Section 6, but he is no dead beat. Why is he here?'

'Volunteered apparently.'

'Interestin'.'

Thomas broke away. 'Damn you, Lord Roxton. We *are* going to the plateau. We *wi*ll stop the German's exploiting the creatures and we will come back with information that will help save lives in the trenches.'

Roxton smiled and glanced at the watchful Roberts.

Thomas pushed the point home. 'We are not doing it for Creed. We are not even doing it for my father. We are doing it because it is the right thing to do. Now, I understand you are carrying an injury and you have done your bit, but Roberts and I, and yes, those men upstairs, would stand a much better chance if we had someone with local knowledge. But, if you don't feel up to helping, we can drop you off in Para when we refuel.'

As he finished Roxton started clapping. 'Bravo! Bravo! A stirring speech – the men always appreciated that. Drop me off! Nonsense. A glorious death, a sportin' chance. I wouldn't miss this for the world! Now show me where you found those submachine guns.'

CHAPTER TWELVE

The field ambulance bumped and lurched its way along the main road from Amiens to Villers-Bretonneux. It was only a journey of a few miles but the way was busy with men and equipment heading for, and returning from, the Front. Milly stared out the back as they passed thousands of anonymous dark figures struggling through the mud. She felt the weight of their fear and exhaustion. With the German offensive pushing ever closer she wondered what determination kept these men going. How fragile their resolve might be that the appearance of just one ravenous monster could shatter it.

She had tried to share her fears with Harriet and explain what Thomas had told her. But Harriet was brought up on a vast ranch near Longreach in Australia's deep north. Her childhood playthings had been wild animals and poisonous insects. She had just laughed and made Milly feel a little ridiculous.

Eventually the truck swung sharply to the left and stopped. In the darkness all Milly could see were piles of rubble on either side of the shell-holed road. Before she could get out, an RAMC officer appeared around the side of the truck with a lantern. He held the light higher to inspect the nurses. 'What on earth are you two doing here?' he asked in surprise.

'We are from number forty-two. Sister said, as things were quiet back there, perhaps we could help at the forward dressing station,' said Milly.

'All very irregular… We need to fill this vehicle. Go and report to the Captain. The station is in that basement by the church.'

Milly smiled at Harriet and bundled out of the truck and headed for the ruined church.

The night was clear and quiet. No rifle fire or artillery. As the tower loomed out of the darkness she was amazed it was still standing. Only two walls remained on the upper floors and the walls of the

ground floor were so pock marked it looked like some giant animals had been chewing away at them.

A warm yellow glow rose up from a set of stairs that disappeared into the ground beneath a ruined hostel. This was where the forward dressing station had been set up. Orderlies were already evacuating the wounded to the ambulance and the two women waited for them to finish before descending the stairs.

Just as they were about to go down, the distant thud of an artillery barrage started up from the enemy lines. Through the clear dark skies came a thin whistle and then a chest-jolting explosion no more than 200 feet away. The nurses dived down into the dressing station as more and more shells came in, peppering the allied positions.

The basement was large. Brick arches stretched into the darkness in all directions. Under a few dull pools of light temporary beds had been set up with a number of benches for the walking wounded. A table against the far wall had mounds of bandages and bottles of antiseptic, and another a large steaming tea urn.

'What are you VADs doing here?' bellowed an angry looking medic who was filling out forms at a small table behind the tea urn.

Milly squinted at him in the darkness. He didn't look like the sort of man who she could charm but, just as she was about to try, Harriet let out a hoot next to her.

'Willie Banning you old bugger. Don't play the gruff brass hat with us or I'll tell my friend Milly here how you like to spend your R'n R.'

Lieutenant Banning, a strapping ANZAC doctor, stood up and stretched. Two bombs landed nearby and dust drifted down from the ceiling but he didn't even flinch.

'Bluey! You're a bleedin' sight for sore eyes,' he said as he came over and gave Harry a hug. 'Just in time. Sounds like they have started chucking it at us again. We had a quiet patch but now it's going to get busy again.'

‘We will help in any way we can, but we have to be back in the hospital before dawn.’

Milly followed the two Aussies deeper into the basement.

‘Can one of you start by sorting out the bandages and the other scrape down those tables before the rush starts,’ he said. Then he paused and listened as more bombs exploded outside. ‘Odd… They don’t usually start in the middle of the night and all those shells are quite small. Haven’t felt any of the heavy stuff yet.’

Milly got on with her work, scraping blood and dirt off the operating table with a bayonet and scrubbing it with Darkin’s antiseptic. As she did so she kept looking at Harriet and nodding at Banning. Reluctantly Harriet took the hint.

‘Willie?’ she said. ‘I know this is going to sound a bit whacko, but back at the hospital we keep on hearing a furphy about our lads being attacked by animals. Well, monsters really. Is anyone talking about it here?’

Banning looked up from his writing. ‘Yes, oddest thing. We had two boys …’

‘Gas! Gas! Gas!’ came a shout from outside.

Banning stopped and pulled out a mask, then found a couple of spares from a pile of equipment by his desk for the VADs.

Just as Milly was fitting hers, a soldier in a mask wandered down the stairs and stood looking a little confused in front of them. There was nothing visibly wrong with him. No wounds or bleeding, but he was covered in a blue powder. He left a trail of it as he entered the station.

Milly stepped forward to help him but Banning grabbed her arm to stop her. He pulled on some thick black gloves and led the man to a bed. Before he could be examined the young man pulled off his gas mask.

‘I don’t think its poison, doc,’ he said. ‘There are plenty of lads out there wanderin’ around without masks and nuffin’ hurts. There’s just this blue powder everywhere, it was in those shells.’

Banning grabbed a sample bag and started to collect powder off the soldier’s uniform. As he did so Milly thought she heard something strange outside. She pulled off her mask and moved towards the stairs. It was far away but it was clear – a man screaming. Then there was another and another. Harriet and Banning removed their masks as well.

Screams began to fill the night air and they were coming closer and closer.

‘Stay here!’ Banning shouted at Harriet and Milly. ‘I’ll take a look.’ He hurried up the stairs and the young soldier leapt off his bed, grabbed his rifle and followed him out.

Both women stood in the empty dressing station waiting. Rifles cracked, Vickers stuttered and men screamed, but still there was no sound from the enemy. From the direction of the shooting the enemy must have broken into the town, but there were no German voices, no sound of Maxims or Mausers. It was as if they were being attacked by ghosts.

Harriet ran to the bottom of the stairs, ‘Willie! Mate!’

The response was just more screams. She bent to look out of the stairwell but, as she did, she noticed she had picked up blue powder on her clothes.

She turned back. ‘I don’t like this Milly,’ she said as she tried to brush the powder off her dress.

At that moment Milly noticed movement on the stairs behind her friend. Something slid into the light and rose up. It was a glossy deep red and seemed to be made out of shiny plates that moved against each other. At first Milly just couldn’t make sense of it. In those precious moments when she should have shouted a warning,

she froze, mesmerized by this sliding, shifting shape. The ‘head’ of the thing seemed to end in a single smooth helmet-like structure and as she watched it slowly rolled back to reveal a pair of blood red jaws.

‘Harry! Look out!’ she screamed but the monster struck, sinking two fangs into Harriet’s shoulder.

As it clung on, several pairs of legs appeared and grasped her waist. Harriet’s body convulsed and she screeched in pain.

Milly grabbed the bayonet off the table and ran forward, screaming. With all her strength she plunged it into the writhing red mouthparts by Harriet’s shoulder. The first time the blade just juddered as if against solid armour. A second plunge also glanced to the side, but the third struck home and sunk deep into soft tissue.

The beast shot back, tearing the bayonet out of her hand and dropping Harriet. Milly drag her friend free.

For the first time she got a clear look at the creature confronting them. It was about fifteen feet long and three feet wide. There seemed countless pairs of black, segmented legs lined with spines. The armored plates had small knobs and dimples over them but were connected by a pale rubbery material which allowed them to flex over each other. The head carapace was smoother, heavier looking and had slide back over its red maw. Despite the terror of the moment, her mind locked on a memory, pictures her father had once shown her.

‘Just a big sodding centipede ,’ she whispered to herself and she recalled a word from her father’s books. ‘Arthropleura.’ Naming the monster calmed her.

Harriet was convulsing with shock in her lap and Milly pulled her further away, under a table against the opposite wall.

The creature started slamming its head from side to side until, finally, it freed the bayonet that clattered across the basement

towards her. Small stubby antennae appeared from under the carapace and started flicking about, tasting the air. It dropped onto its fore legs and drew the rest of its body into the room. With a gentle click and swish of its body parts it started to explore the basement.

Milly kept perfectly still and watched.

Slowly the nightmare drew closer and closer, searching the air for scents. Every so often it stopped and explored an item with what seemed like extra excitement. At first this just seemed to be random but then it knocked over a box of dressings. It ignored all of them excepted for one which it grabbed with its fangs and then energetically explored with its mouthparts. As far as she could see this was the only bandage contaminated with blue powder.

It was then that Milly noticed her dress was covered in the same powder. It had to be some sort of attractant.

At that moment the predator dropped the bandage and locked on to the nurses. It raised its front half again, preparing to strike.

Milly reached up, grasped the table above her and dragged it forward so it fell between them, toppling the tea urn and splashing boiling hot water over the animal.

It whipped back, rattling its plates and working its scalded mouthparts.

Milly knew at best she had only brought herself seconds. Frantically she looked about for a weapon. Next to her sat the table with Banning's sample bag and the Darkin's antiseptic. She leapt up and grabbed the large bottle, unscrewed the top and planted it in front of the creature. Next she took the bag and dumped the contents over the bottle before jumping back behind the table.

For a while the creature continued to methodically clean its mouthparts but, eventually, it dropped down and began its hunting sweeps again. Quickly it picked up Milly's trap and struck with

lightening speed. It lifted the bottle high in the air and in a mass of writhing maxillae, palps and mandibles, manipulated it towards its mouth. The antiseptic began to pour into its pulsing gullet. For a moment it did not react but then it whipped to the side flinging the bottle against the wall. But it was too late, the poison was inside.

The enormous creature began to thrash around the small basement, slamming its head against the walls and destroying the dressing station in its frenzy.

Protected by her table Milly tried to attend to Harriet. Her eyes were glazed and she was burning up. Milly tore her uniform and inspected the two puncture wounds in her shoulder. There was no blood, instead the flesh was pale and swollen. The bite had been venomous. Milly looked around but there was nothing she could do. There was no equipment and she could not move, let alone escape. Screams still drifted down from outside and the foul creature was thrashing about at the bottom of the stairs. All she could do was hug her friend closer and wait.

Dawn light slowly filled the stair well and illuminated Milly's brick prison. With light the screams died away and were replaced by an unnatural silence. She imagined the ruins above were crawling with hundreds of these monsters and the troops were either dead or had fled. By the stairs the creature would not die, still its mouthparts moved and its legs twitched. Beside her Harriet was now in some sort of coma. Her eyes unresponsive and a clear froth dribbling from the side of her mouth.

Milly stroked her thick, damp hair and cried silently. She knew her beautiful, bright friend was slipping away. Harry should not have followed her.

About an hour or so after dawn, she felt Harriet's wrist for a pulse but there was nothing. She lay her down and checked for other vital signs but she was gone. Milly had expected this. She had prepared herself but what she had not expected was a spasm of terror. She was completely alone and had no idea what to do next.

Shaking she stood. In the dim light her friend lay on the ground staring at her. Milly had to get away but, as she headed for the stairs, she heard German voices. Heavy equipment was being moved into the town. Metal cages were being unlocked and slammed shut.

She staggered back to Harriet's lifeless body as the sounds came closer. Someone was outside the cellar. She ducked down behind the table and clasped onto her friend again.

'Help me!' she muttered. 'Sorry. Sorry.'

Soon a shadow appeared at the top of the stairs and then a pair of legs. The arthropleurid was still twitching. The legs disappeared and more shadows appeared and more voices. Eventually the legs reappeared and, to Milly's shock, the end of a flamethrower.

Milly flattened herself behind the table as the basement exploded in flame. The table protected her from the fire and intense heat but the air filled with thick black smoke. Milly tried to breath, but immediately choked and retched. She had to run for it even if it meant capture but, just as she tried to stagger to her feet, she felt a down pipe against the wall. Quickly she felt for the bayonet and then smashed a hole in the clay pipe. Her lungs burning she fixed her mouth over the small hole and sucked in the stale but clean air.

For what seemed an eternity she remained there, her mouth clamped to the pipe. She kept her eyes tightly shut and her body curled into a ball to protect her hands and face from the heat. Gradually the fires ignited by the flamethrower burned down and the smoke began to clear. She heard voices on the stairs but soon they left, presumably satisfied nothing was left alive in the basement.

When finally she had the courage to open her eyes she saw everything was covered in a layer of black soot, including Harriet's body. By the stairs the creature had finally stopped moving, its charred legs curled upwards in surrender. Somehow Milly had survived, but she still had to escape.

Outside the voices were further away now and she decided she would wait until dark before trying to slip away. So she pulled off her cap and started to clean the soot off Harriet. Then she removed both their aprons and gently she wrapped the body. Finally she kissed her on the forehead and sat back, waiting for night.

With a start she awoke to complete darkness. She opened and shut her eyes several times before she realized she must have slept through the day. There was no light in the soot filled basement, so she had to feel her way across the room towards the stairs. In the darkness she cut her finger of one of the leg spines of the dead arthropleurid and, even as she tried to step over it, its corpse tugged and caught her clothes.

Cautiously she climbed the stairs and scanned the ruins for Germans or giant centipedes.

It was a cloudy moonless night and some distance away she could see the lights of men and machines moving west on the road to Amiens. Fortunately there was nobody around the church or the old dressing station, so she decided to head away from the road and strike off north. Her plan was to find the railway and then follow it west, back to the British lines.

Moving quietly over unfamiliar ruins in the dark was almost impossible and several times she fell and cut or bruised herself. To her relief, after about half a mile, she reached a small road between two fields and began to make faster progress. Soon she approached another town that was busy with enemy troop movements, but by now she was feeling bolder. She slipped across a bridge and none of the trucks drivers took any notice of her. Ahead, the town of Corbie also lay in ruins, but she found a clear road to take her round the outskirts and it was not long before she came across a rail crossing. Here she left the road, turned to the west and began to walk along the tracks.

On the western horizon she could see flashes and, for the first time, realised just how far behind the enemy lines she was. It was

possible the enemy had moved so far and so fast that they had overrun her field hospital and were at Amiens itself.

Were these giant arthropleurids the creatures Thomas had feared? They weren't dinosaurs and her father had never mentioned seeing them on the plateau. Where was Thomas when she needed him? She had asked him to come to Flanders but, instead, he had run off to the Amazon, chasing his endless obsession with his father's work. He could have been in Amiens, helping to warn people and saving lives. Yet again, he wasn't there when she needed him most.

Next moment her feet became wrapped in some wires that were lying across the track and, as she tried to pull them free, she fell heavily. She was exhausted and could barely summon the energy to drag the wire from around her legs. She lay back and stared at the starless night sky above her. Resting a few minutes while she got her energy back would not be such a bad idea.

She reached into her pocket and pulled out the large handkerchief Harriet had spotted in her suitcase just a few days before. It was the one Thomas had given her at the bombsite and it still smelt faintly of his aftershave. She lifted it to her face and breathed in his memory.

Just as she closed her eyes she heard a rustling in the nearby hedge. She froze, hoping she would not be visible in the darkness.

Someone stepped onto the clinker and walked towards her. A silhouette loomed over her and she realized it was pointing a pistol at her head.

'Qui es-tu?' the man hissed at her.

Milly's mind raced to think of the best response.

'Qui es-tu?' he repeated louder. 'Ce que tu fais ici?'

Milly shifted back away from him and in her best school-girl French said, 'Desolee, Monsieur, je suis perdue.'

The man rustled in his pocket, pulled out a box of matches and lit one.

In the flare of light Milly saw his face. It was terrifying, horribly disfigured and, despite herself, she cried in alarm.

He drew closer. 'Are you English?'

'No, I mean…Non,' she stammered.

'Then why are you wearing a British nurse's uniform?'

Milly began to compose herself. 'What are you going to do?'

'Well, for a start, I am going to rewire the bomb you have just disconnected so I can blow this line and then get out of here before the bloody Germans come looking for us.'

In the dying light of the match she looked at him closely. He was a large man with ginger hair. The wound to his face had removed part of his nose and cheek on one side. It had healed badly and he was clearly blind in one eye. Milly had seen many men with injuries like his and she felt bad she had reacted with shock.

'I am sorry, I did not mean to get in the way. I am a nurse out of 42 Stationary and I was at Villers-Bretonneux last night when it was still in Allied hands. Now I am just trying to get back home.'

'You had better come with me. There are lots of patrols about and they tend to shoot first and then ask questions.' He dropped the match and then whistled twice. Two men appeared on the track, one with a torch, and they pulled the wires off Milly as the stranger helped her to her feet.

He led her into a coppice by the line where two further men were waiting by a detonation box.

'You were lucky,' he said. 'We were all set to go when you came wandering down the line. The lads were happy to see you go up with the rail, but your feet breaking the wire settled the argument.'

‘Who are you? How come you’re this side of the lines?’

‘We were all POWs until recently. Escaped. But couldn’t get back so decided to dabble in a bit of sabotage. Anything to stick it to the Hun. Whole country’s such a mess now it has turned out to be easier than I thought.’

The two men from the track rejoined the group.

‘Right, stick a timer on it and let’s get out of here. You might as well come with us because there is no way through the lines here. But you won’t be able to stay mind, it’s too dangerous.’

‘My name is Milly,’ she said.

‘Edward. Captain Edward Malone, at your service Ms Milly.’

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Before the airship reached the coast of Brazil, Thomas Challenger noticed the deep blue waters beneath him changing colour where the vast mouth of the Amazon was pouring millions of tonnes of silt into the Atlantic. The size of the river was quite beyond anything he could have imagined. As the R34 turned south towards Para it took

hours to cross the estuary and all its islands and it was evening by the time they reached the Ilha de Marajo; a green mat of forests, palm swamps and savannah, riddled with sinewy rivers. Thomas sat in the rear gondola with the windows open, enjoying the cool tropical breeze.

Roxton said he felt distinctly queasy in the gondola and spent most of the trip in the keel corridor with the other soldiers. Thomas believed him when he said he enjoyed their company, but he also knew damn well that Roxton was trying to get the measure of Gregory, mostly it would seem, by trying to irritate him. However, to give Roxton his due, it didn't seem to take much to annoy the Captain. It was clear he was not happy being in charge of the expedition, but it was not immediately apparent why.

Without thinking Thomas realised he had been turning his engagement ring round and round in his pocket. He took it out looking at it afresh with its missing stone and thought of the awful circumstances under which he got it back. He needed to keep busy.

Thomas leant over and pulled a small battered folder out of his knapsack. It contained a number of letters his father had written to him after he had set off on his doomed second expedition. This included the one he had brandished at the Institute. However, Thomas had not actually let anyone else read them - not even Milly's father. This was because, for the most part, they read like the rants of a madman and he was embarrassed by them. His father seemed angry with everyone and some of his theories seemed more about getting even with his detractors than furthering science.

A lot depended on what his father had or had not seen, so once again Thomas poured over them for clues. Buried amongst the vitriol, his father had noted unusual German container ships on the Amazon; new docks at Para and crates full of equipment. But with this detailed study there was something else that Thomas had not expected - the letters made him feel sad. He began to see beyond the larger than life character and sensed a lonely, disappointed man.

Abandoned and dismissed by all he knew, his anger seemed to be all that was holding him together. How different from the domineering, confident man he remembered.

Just as the sun was setting, Roberts hurried down into the gondola. 'God, it's getting tense up there. I am sure Gregory is going to punch your Lord soon.'

'That will hurt, I can vouch for that,' said Thomas quickly slipping the paper back into the folder.

'What's that letter?' asked Roberts.

'Oh, nothing. Just some notes I have been making about the trip.'

Roberts sat down opposite him and, before he could stop her, picked up the folder. 'Can I see?' she said.

'No!' he said rather too loudly while hiding the folder.

Thomas could not work out what bothered him about Roberts. She was unlike any woman he had met before. She had to be loyal to Creed, but she seemed to genuinely prefer to spend her time with him rather than with Gregory and his men and he had to admit he enjoyed it. It was a pleasure to be able to talk about the plateau and his father's work to such a receptive audience. A refreshing alternative to Milly, who always tried to change the subject.

Now Roberts was sitting opposite him, their knees touching and her large brown eyes studying him.

'Sorry, personal stuff.' He rustled his map. 'I think that is Rio Aran down there.'

'I understand,' she said slowly. 'You don't know me. But the honest truth is I am not really a soldier, just a scientist like you. Given the make-up of the rest of this crew, you can't blame me for wanting to share this adventure with you.'

She paused and looked out of the window. ‘I also have to admit… I am a little frightened. Don’t get me wrong. I have dreamed of visiting the plateau since I first read about it, but I don’t want to die there.’

Thomas shuffled his papers.

She began to get up to leave. ‘Forgive me. I did not mean to pry.’

Thomas put his hand out and held her wrist. ‘Sorry I was rude. Sit back down. Please.’ He pulled out one of the letters.

‘This was the last letter my father wrote before he disappeared. It was sent from Manaos, but I am sure he wrote it from somewhere on the Japura. Ignore his comments on the president of the Royal Geographic Society and his theories about selective sterilisation of palaeontologists, and tell me what you think of the second page.’

Roberts began to read.

Thomas watched her as a broad smile spread across her face. For the first time he noticed she had a dimple on one cheek and not the other.

‘I love your father’s writing,’ she said. ‘I know people thought he could be scary and boorish, but I just think he had a wicked sense of humour.’

‘Yes, yes he was a real treasure. But the second page? Remember this is a man who poured scorn on any native superstitions like curupuri.’

Roberts read on. As she did her brow furrowed. ‘Shadow walkers? His tone has changed here. The writing is more hurried.’ She looked up at Thomas. ‘He’s not joking is he?’

‘No. That is what worries me. Abandoned villages; rumours of demons; slaughtering whole communities. There can be only one conclusion.’

Roberts nodded. ‘The dinosaurs have escaped the plateau.’

For a while both sat in silence.

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It was night when Para came into sight. As they approached the bright lights of the city, flying low over the river, he could hear the shouts as the locals poured on to the streets to take a look. Someone must have warned them of their arrival because, the moment they loomed out of the darkness, four fires were lit on the far side of the city. The captain steered the vast ship towards them. Hundreds of helpers appeared and grappled with the guide ropes so soon they were hauled down low enough to disembark.

Roxton was first out and, after briefly advising Thomas to avoid Gregory, he disappeared into the darkness muttering something about business he had to attend to.

Gregory and his men started setting up camp on the edge of the field. Thomas slung his bedding over his shoulder and found himself a spot under a large fig tree. From his position he had a fine view of the airship, with the huge letters ‘R34’ on the side, lit by the four fires. As he fell asleep he thought of how jealous his father would have been to arrive in Amazonia by airship.

The next morning Roxton had not returned and Thomas began to wonder whether he had done a runner after all.

Gregory was furious because the gas and fuel coming from America for the next stage of their journey had been delayed. He took Roberts with him to go and argue with the local supplier. Then the wind picked up and the airship broke some of its tethers. This kept the soldiers busy, so no one asked any questions about his missing Lordship.

Through the morning the temperature climbed and, despite the breeze, Thomas began to swelter. He tried keeping still in the shade

but there was no escaping it. He felt the sweat trickle down his back and damp patches grow under his arms. Eventually he had to take his tie off or he thought he would faint. Still, he was stuck with the woollen jacket and trousers he had brought.

About midday he received a note from Roxton. A cab was waiting for him and soon he was heading into Para. To his surprise it was not the flyblown wooden outpost of his European prejudices, it proved to be a civilised jewel in the middle of a green sea. Everywhere he looked there were plazas, public gardens, magnificent municipal buildings and churches. It was a place full of history and money.

After fifteen minutes, the cab turned into a road lined with ancient mangroves. Behind these were several elegant domestic palaces. The cab stopped outside some large white gates where Roxton was waiting in the shade of a tree. Somehow he had found himself a light travelling suit and had a change of clothes under his arm as well as a water bottle.

Roxton greeted him. 'I thought so. Creed didn't even help kit you out. Now sit down and drink. You look an absolute mess.'

Thomas gratefully drank the water.

'There is a trough behind this tree,' Roxton added. 'Wash and then put these on. It is not the Savoy, but I want you to look your best for our meetin'.'

As Thomas dressed Roxton revealed that, since they arrived, he had been trying to find his old contacts and gather his own information about what was happening further up the Amazon. Many were either dead, or had moved on, but he discovered one, a Senor Lucio Rodrigues, was still very much alive. They were now standing in front of his house.

'When I was last in this city,' he said, 'it was in crisis. The rubber trade had collapsed and those who could were gettin' out.'

Thomas was drying himself on his old shirt. ‘Well, something must have changed; you can smell the money here.’

‘Exactly, and I don’t think it is from the timber industry.’

Thomas came out from behind the tree.

Roxton sighed and tried to straighten his hair. ‘Never mind, Rodrigues is expectin’ us at one.’ He turned and headed through the gate.

Challenger hurried after him. ‘Wasn’t your anti-slavery work partly responsible for their problems with rubber? Are you sure these people are your friends?’

Roxton looked back and smiled. ‘None of that matters if there is business in it.’

Together they walked up the short, manicured path to the house. There were two men on the veranda by the front door, one with a shotgun across his lap. The second got up as they approached.

‘Senor Rodrigues is expectin’ us,’ said Roxton to the guard.

Suddenly a shout went up from within and a woman threw open the front door. She stepped forward and enveloped Roxton in her arms.

‘John, where have you been for so long? I feared you had died in those awful cold trenches. Where is the lovely Mr Malone? You’ve lost weight I am sure.’ Without waiting for any response she then grasped him again.

Thomas was completely bowled over. Maybe it was the heat or the lack of breakfast but he could not remember ever seeing such a wondrous woman. She was about thirty, with long, thick black hair and brown skin. She had the most fashionable white lace dress, which showed off a generous curved figure. He was entranced.

‘I confess it’s been too long, Flavia,’ said Roxton, gently detaching himself. ‘I haven’t lost weight but, alas, I did leave Mr Malone in

those cold trenches.'

Flavia's expression effortlessly moved from joy to sympathy.

'He was a beautiful man, John. I can tell you miss him.' She sighed and then turned to Thomas. 'And who is this happy young gentleman?'

It was only then that he realised he was wearing a ridiculous grin.

Roxton momentarily paused and Thomas stepped forward his hand outstretched. 'Thomas Challenger, Senora. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.'

Flavia's face set and she left Thomas's hand hanging there.

Roxton reached out and lowered his arm. 'Yes, this is George Challenger's son, but he is nothin' like his father. As I mentioned in my note, we urgently need to talk with Lucio. I understood he would be in.'

In an instant Flavia's smile returned. 'So you have not travelled all this way to see me? And I always took you to be a romantic. Never mind, come in and I will try and find boring old Lucio. Young Challenger, you can join us, but please don't be like your father.'

The pair waited in the light, airy hall while Flavia went hunting for her husband. Thomas inhaled the sweet scent of tropical blooms. The walls were covered in photographs of boats and their crews; some large steamers, others no more than covered canoes.

'Nothin' happens on the river without old man Rodrigues knowin' about it,' said Roxton. 'He will know whether the Germans are still up there.'

'The Flail of the Lord returns!' A large man with a thick black beard and silver hair appeared at the door. 'What an entrance, riding a giant airship in the night!' This was Lucio Rodrigues. He had a scar running down the side of his face and looked every bit as scary as Roxton had suggested.

Thomas decided to hang back and let his companion do the talking.

'Just a sign of how important His Majesty's government views this expedition,' said Roxton. 'Now we are allies against the Germans, we are here to strengthen ties between our countries.'

There was a silence while Rodrigues scratched his beard and considered the situation. 'Then come dine with us Lord Roxton and I shall hear what you have to say. Flavia! I hope it is pork.'

They all moved through to a central courtyard where several stout palms provided shade for a large, well-laid dining table. Servants attended; moving chairs, serving food, and beating a cooling breeze. Everything was of the utmost luxury. In particular, in the centre of the table, was a bowl of the most extraordinarily cones giving off a heady fragrance.

Roxton took full advantage of the wine and he and Lucio got louder and louder as they exchanged views on the war in Europe, America's involvement and Brazil's lost neutrality. Not once did either mention the plateau.

As Thomas watched he could not help but be impressed by Roxton. Despite the quantities he had drunk he never put a foot wrong. Helped by his knowledge of South America, his natural charm, and a lot of brass neck, he gradually broke down Rodrigues natural hostility.

After a couple of hours a man came and whispered in Lucio's ear. He nodded and looked at Roxton. 'It seems your supplies from Florida are arriving in dock. Do you really still intend to take that airship up river? There is a high chance it will not make it back.'

'The R34 has proved itself a robust means of transport,' said Roxton. 'Why? Are there any dangers we're not aware of there?'

'I know you intend to return to your *mundo perdido*,' he said, 'but I must warn you, things have changed. Six months ago one of my finest steamships, *La Para*, drifted into Manaos. She had been on a

job up the Japura. There was no one on board, at least no bodies. Just blood…' Lucio glanced at Flavia. She was pale. 'Forty men disappeared in an unimaginable slaughter. There have always been rumours of evil spirits on the river, all that curipuri nonsense. But now even my most experienced traders will not use the Japura. They call it "*a terra de sombras mortais*".'

Thomas could not hold back. 'Deadly shadows. My father Professor Challenger writes about this. Are there any descriptions of these things?'

Rodrigues' expression darkened at the mention of Challenger and Roxton quickly cut in. 'Senor, I've been to that particular hell and come back. It holds no surprises for me. But I must ask. Could German soldiers be behind this? Keepin' pryin' eyes away from the plateau?'

'I have not encountered any Germans on the river for over a year. It does not mean they are not there but, if so, they must have taken up residence.' He clicked his fingers and a servant handed him a small package. 'If you insist on going I thought you might need some of this.'

Roxton nodded his appreciation and slipped it into his pocket.

There was a noise in the hallway, and a man appeared in the courtyard with a rather flustered Corporal Roberts behind him.

'Now it seems you must go, Lord Roxton,' said Rodrigues. 'I am sorry I cannot help you any more, but I have to be honest and say that I regret the day we provided the
Esmeralda to Professor Challenger for his first expedition. I believe he found a hornet's nest deep in the jungle. And, now he has disturbed it, we will all suffer.'
Lucio stood and shook Roxton's hand before leaving.

Flavia was about to leave when Thomas called after her. 'Senora, this has been a delightful meal. May I take one of these cones from

the centrepiece as a momento?'

She nodded and then approached Roxton. 'Don't be in such a hurry to join Mr Malone, John,' she said, and then kissed him on the lips.

'If I may ask a small favour also,' said Roxton, and then he whispered in her ear.

She tilted her head in agreement, and turned to leave the room.

Roberts finally managed to deliver her urgent message - they were to leave the moment the airship was gassed and refuelled. Everyone who intended to continue on the journey had to be there or Gregory would leave them behind.

As they rushed into a cab, Thomas took the cone out of his pocket. 'See this strange, fragrant cone. I would swear there is nothing like this anywhere else in the world. It is my guess this comes from a plant similar to Professor Summerlee's bennettite. Proof, if you needed it, that either Rodrigues has worked with the Germans or has been to the plateau himself.'

'The proof's all around you here in Para,' replied Roxton. 'The Germans must have spent a fortune buyin' everyone's cooperation in this city, and Lucio would've benefitted more than most. I'm clear all that has stopped now and they have all left town, but I still don't know whether they've left anyone on the plateau.'

'What did he give you in that package?'

'None of your business, lad, none of your business.'

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In the end they need not have hurried as it took the rest of that day and into the night to complete the R34's preparations for the next leg of its journey.

As the sun rose over the vast Para River the airship finally lifted into the air and headed northwest. Thomas returned to his favourite place in the rear gondola to get as far away as he could from Captain Gregory. After only a short time all sign of human habitation disappeared. Instead there was just one endless brown watercourse curling round sandbanks and islands, throwing out meandering tributaries and surrounded by an impenetrable green carpet as far as the eye could see. He spent hours watching bats, birds and monkeys moving among the upper canopy below, and wondered if these creatures ever ventured from the sunlit tree tops to the dark world beneath.

By mid-afternoon his ruminations were interrupted by Gregory ordering his men up and down the keel corridor to practise trimming the airship. Their weight threw the blimp about and profoundly irritated Thomas.

Roxton joined him and they talked about the Amazon. Roxton's passion for this land was unquenchable and Thomas began to appreciate the majesty of the huge living landscape beneath him. He was only just realising how easy it must have been for a vast plateau to remain undiscovered for so long in such a place.

Roberts seemed less impressed by the Lord's enthusiasm and spent the time studying monographs on evolution by a Professor Lankester.

On one occasion Roxton winked at Thomas and turned to Roberts. 'Interestin' chap that Lankester. Hear he's doin' a grand job at the Museum.'

Roberts didn't look up. 'He did, but that was ten years ago. You should keep up with things more my Lord.'

Thomas couldn't help grin at Roxton's failed attempt to catch her out, but he just hurrumphed and went back to describing the taste of spider monkeys.

Night brought a heavy thunderstorm. The crew did their best to avoid it but they ended up heading straight into it. Thomas had never experienced such violent movement and, at any moment, it felt like the airship would tear itself apart as it plummeted or was swept up hundreds of feet. It was like a grim fairground ride. Water cascaded through the superstructure, one engine sheared off and a window fell out of the rear gondola. Soon all but essential crew had strapped themselves down in the central keel corridor. With each blinding flash of lightning they prayed the hydrogen bags would not be hit. Even the most hardened crew members started to look worried when a large hole appeared in the outer envelop.

Yet, miraculously, the vast structure held together. As soon as the storm cleared, the crew started to feverishly mend everything they could. Crucially the gasbags themselves were unharmed and, after an inspection, the captain concluded it was safe to continue. Thomas, meanwhile, was left wondering whether this really was a practical form of travel.

All the next day they followed the river. Gregory had a man with binoculars watching every ship they passed for signs of hostile activity. Roxton thought this a monumental waste of time, but Thomas pointed out it kept the men busy after the terrifying experience they had all been through.

They passed over Manaos as night fell, and the captain slowed their progress so they did not miss the north bank tributary in the darkness. However, as dawn broke, rain clouds rolled in and they had to lose altitude just to keep the banks visible. At last Roxton spotted the Japura tributary and the lumbering airship turned north.

They still had to watch the banks, this time for the concealed river Challenger had used to lead his expedition to the plateau six years before. Unfortunately the mist became thicker and thicker and Roxton remembered the tributary was hard to spot, even from the water.

However, after a few hours of ever slower progress, Roberts called Roxton forward. He need not have worried about missing the tributary. There, on the left bank, was a large wooden harbour and landing pier. Heading off into the jungle from this was a wide mud road. The first clear sign that someone had been exploiting the area. The path headed west, towards where Roxton said the plateau stood, and so it was decided to follow it rather than the river.

The thick cloud now prevented them for seeing more than a few hundred feet ahead. They tracked the path as it cut through lowland swamps. Soon the land began to rise and the vegetation thinned out.

Roxton ordered the captain to slow to his minimum speed as he strained to see through the mist. The path drove through rocky slopes and on into a tree fern forest before twisting off to the left. It was hard for Roxton to relate what he had seen on the ground years before with what he was now looking down upon. The normally unflappable lord began to look unsure. As the time passed the crew began to exchange glances and the captain whispered his doubts to Gregory. Still the wall of mist rolled towards them.

Gregory sauntered up to Roxton who was staring out of the forward windows of the front gondola. For a short while he stared out at the blankness with him. Then he sighed; 'We are beginning to the lose the light. I suggest we moor up for the evening. In the morning the mist will probably have cleared and then we can gain height take a little look around and stop this wild goose chase. What do you say old guy?'

Gregory's needling was beginning to find its target. Roxton chewed his lip as he steadfastly ignored the man next to him fixed his eyes on the white blanket that continued to swirl hopelessly before him. He started to fancy he saw shapes in it - faces, houses, tall columns.

Suddenly Roxton gripped the bar in front of him. 'Up, up, up!' he screamed.

The captain swung his wheel and pitched the nose up. In front of Roxton materialising out of the mist was a massive wall of basalt.

Gregory's men mobilised and ran down to the stern section, just as they had trained to do. The rock face drew nearer as the airship raced upward.

Then they burst out of the clouds and, at the same time, rose over the edge of the cliff. In one breath-taking moment the ancient plateau, Professor Challenger's lost world, opened out before them - bathed in bright evening sunshine.

As the ship drew level again Thomas moved next to Roxton. Below them the plateau stretched out to the north and southwest. Most of the area near them was covered in a dark green forest. From above the geometric crowns of tree ferns packed together to form a dense understory, but at regular points giant podocarps punched through and held up clusters of dark green leaves to harvest the light. Their pale branches were covered with epiphytic ferns and supported necklaces of vines. As the huge airship crept forward strange flying creatures exploded out of the branches and scattered into the dark green depths below. Further away, Thomas could see the forest gave way to open areas. In particular, there was a large central lake and towards the far side of the plateau more basalt outcrops rose up like a distance?? metropolis.

It was everything Thomas dreamed it would be. Every inch of it hung with mystery and danger. Since the day he first learnt about it from his father, it had been the place he most wanted to see in the world. He was not a spiritual man at all; but he did believe it was his destiny to come here.

Directly below the tree ferns began to sway and shake. Insects, leaves and dust rose into the air as four huge brown and white striped shapes burst into a small clearing. Long hefty backbones flexed between massive thigh muscles as they pounded their way through the dense vegetation.

‘Look, that’s … I think those are Iguanodon!’ shouted Thomas. He pointed to the four lumbering giants that were now heading for some larger trees having taken fright at the sight of the airship. As they lifted their heads, he could see their yellow eyes roll and inflate large red nasal sacs in alarm.

Roxton nodded. ‘Your first dinosaurs. They won’t be your last.’

Thomas’ mouth just hung open. It was all true. As fantastic and unbelievable as it seemed there they were – living dinosaurs. At first his brain tried to make them rhinoceros or even elephant sized but each time they swatted aside a huge tree ferns, he was shocked by their enormity. This plateau was a gift to mankind from Nature, an extraordinary fluke providing a lens that drew the deep past into the present. For a moment he shut out all around him and basked in the privilege.

‘Amazing,’ he breathed

‘Your father would have been proud of you.’

Thomas recovered himself and shrugged. ‘To be honest I can imagine him being jealous of us floating over his plateau in an airship, or irritated it had taken me so long to come and find him but “proud of me”? No that was not something in his nature.’

Captain Gregory was back in the stern shouting at his men, ordering them into the gondolas to prepare to return fire should they encounter the enemy.

‘We should try and put down by the lake,’ Roxton muttered to the captain. ‘It is open ground and we will be able to see anyone approachin’.’

‘Head for the lake,’ shouted Gregory from above. ‘It is open ground and we should be able to lay down a defensive ring.’

Roxton smiled at Thomas.

The airship settled about 300 feet above the plateau forest. The captain cut all the engines and an almost magical silence descended. Drifting up from below came the strangest collections of calls Thomas had ever heard. Hoots, screeches and honks seemed to reach up to him, beckoning him down to their benign primeval paradise beneath. Perhaps most surprising and unnerving was the amount of calls he felt rather than heard. Somewhere down below beasts of such size were issuing calls so deep it was like experiencing the vibration from an artillery shell.

The momentum of the R34 carried them forward at a gentle pace. Ahead the thick forest gave way to sickly looking shrubs, interrupted by large patches of grey mud with steam rising from it.

'Is that where the volcanic pools are, Lord John?' asked Thomas trying hard not to sound like an excited child.

'I think so,' said Roxton with a frown. 'That reminds me. Has anyone spotted any flyin' reptiles?'

He had hardly finished the sentence when the front windows darkened and an ear-splitting shriek made him duck for cover. Then, one of the starboard windows in the gondola smashed and a long dark beak thrust through catching the captain on the shoulder.

Thomas rolled over and was back on his feet in a second. There, struggling to cling on to the window frame, was a large black pterosaur. The brutal and dangerous side of his primeval paradise had risen up to meet him. To Thomas, with its dark fur and leathery wings, it looked more like a bat with a giant head than a reptile. As it thrashed about trying to climb inside, his lethal grey beak stabbed back and forth, smashing equipment and catching another member of the crew. If ever something had earned the adjective 'demonic' - this was it.

The pterosaurs' blood red eyes spotted Roxton on the floor beneath him and its scruffy neck arched back to deliver a killer blow.

At the same moment, Gregory dropped down the ladder next to Thomas, with his pistol ready. Before the reptile could drive its beak down he fired three times into its chest and head.

The pterosaur's leathery fingers loosened their grip and it fell away from the gondola, spiralling down into the jungle.

Roxton scrabbled up. 'Damn. Pterosaurs. That was close. We should've been prepared for that.'

Gregory was looking over Roxton's shoulder. 'It is not over yet… Men! Prepare to defend the gondolas.'

About a half mile ahead, rising up around the area of the volcanic pools were hundreds of pterosaurs. They were all heading for the airship.

Quickly the soldiers set up at all the windows and started firing at the approaching flock. But they were difficult targets and most headed higher, landing on the top of the ship.

Roxton was by Thomas's shoulder, pushing a rifle into his hand. 'We must get up to the top hatch. If they settle up there they could tear this thing to pieces.'

Thomas followed Roxton back up the ladder and down the corridor to the rear.

Men were shouting and fighting everywhere he looked. One member of the crew had had the same idea and was already up the ladder to the rear hatch but, just as he opened it, a beak skewered him and ripped him out of sight.

Roxton took off his jacket and, as he climbed to the open hatch, he threw it in front of him. Again a shaft like beak swept across, snatching the coat away. But, at the same time, Roxton fired his pistol, hitting the creature in the skull and killing it stone dead.

'Quick, Thomas! You cover my back.'

Thomas was not a good shot and had an urgent desire to sit down and discuss tactics, but Roxton was a man on a mission.

Both wriggled out of the hatch together and started firing. They managed to dispatch three or four of the nearest pterosaurs immediately but it was hopeless, there were too many. They had already started on the airship's envelope and once large sections of cloth were flapping about it seemed to make them even more excited. The air was full of shrieking pterosaurs.

Roberts called up from below. 'Cease fire! Cease fire! They have penetrated one of the gasbags and hydrogen is pouring out. You could blow us all up.'

'Down,' shouted Roxton and he pulled the hatch shut just before another beak reached them.

Back in the corridor Roberts was shouldering her backpack. 'We are losing height fast but we should still make the central lake area. It is going to be a hard landing. Grab anything you need and get ready to jump.'

Both men had prepared their own backpacks days ago and were quickly into the rear gondola. For the first time Thomas realised just how far they had dropped, the ground was now racing beneath them. The engines had been cut but they were nose down and heading for the beach. He gripped on to the central table and waited.

Suddenly there was a tearing of metal and a splintering of wood as the front section ploughed into the sand. The force of the impact shattered the ships spine and the rear section just dropped. Thomas's gondola struck the ground throwing everyone in it to the floor. As the rest of the ship rolled to one side, the gondola was ripped free of the superstructure.

Thomas was up quickly, bruised but unhurt.

A dazed Roxton needed help getting to his feet. ‘Quick, before those bloody pterosaurs come after us!’ he shouted.

Together they clambered out of the shattered gondola and started to run to the tree line about a quarter of a mile away. Several others, crew and soldiers, were fleeing the stricken airship, but the pterosaurs were also abandoning the wreck and some of them were circling above the beach. To his left he heard a scream as the first creature dropped down on a soldier and started viciously tearing at his flesh.

They reached a stand of tree ferns and, now they had overhead cover, turned round and started firing on the aerial attackers. Then Thomas noticed smoke rising from the back of the wreckage.

‘I don’t think we’ve run far enough.’ He grabbed Roxton’s arm and dragged him deeper into the forest. Just as the undergrowth began to thin out there was a bright white flash of light and they were flung to the ground. The hydrogen had ignited in an enormous ball of flame.

Roxton and Challenger lay still for a while as pieces of burning wreckage dropped down through the tress. Slowly the sound and fury died down and, except for the occasional smaller explosion, calm returned. Thomas rolled over and through the trees he could see a column of black smoke winding up into the blue sky.

‘I hope everyone got out,’ said Thomas.

‘At least that must’ve taken a lot of those hairy bastards out,’ replied Roxton.

‘Maybe. But now there will be no magic carpet home.’

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Time was running out and General Burloff knew it. He poked at the plate of thick greasy bacon in front of him but he had no appetite. So he leant back and, for the thousandth time, stared out at the flat green sea that was the Flanders countryside. This journey had taken a day, which was unacceptable. At Namur the hold-up had been because of buildings burning and riots in the streets. Outside Charleroi saboteurs had blown the line. The Empire was crumbling and, without military success, it would be the end.

The crystal glasses on his table clinked as his carriage was coupled to a powerful black engine that was to take him on the final stage, south, to the Biowaffen facility. He was waiting in the sidings of a whole new railhead that had been built specially for the facility at the small town of Iwuy on the Cambrai line. He drummed his fingers as he waited impatiently for forward movement.

Burloff was one of Ludendorff's most ardent supporters and he believed in the spring offensive objectives, but he knew it was stalling. The Biowaffen creatures might be a high-stakes gamble, but there was no longer any point in holding back.

A gentle tug and squeal of metal wheels on track signalled the start of the final leg of his journey. It was a bright clear morning; so he stood and slid open a small window above his head to take a deep breath of fresh air. As they pulled out of the sidings he saw several massive metal carriages. Each was reinforced with metal girders and had no windows. These were the dinosaur transport vehicles.

Burloff pushed the breakfast things to one side and pulled out the Biowaffen files he had had prepared. Before he moved to replace Richter, Burloff had seconded several of his own men to the Unit. Their reports lay before him. Those about Von Heket had been chilling.

He read the first document. '…. *ruthless, driven, and intelligent* …' everything Burloff admired '… *he has a strong anti-establishment streak*…' less attractive '… *two colleagues have been lost in accidents in dinosaur pens* …' . definitely not good '… *he has secrets* …' Von Heket was a very dangerous man.

Burloff was not looking forward to Cambrai. He was meeting Von Heket on his home ground and he had not actually seen any of these animals before. By all accounts the experience was not going to be pleasant.

Soon they were clear of the depot and into countryside. Gradually the neat hedges and managed fields he had been staring at for miles began to change. The landscape became unkempt. Hedgerows were overgrown and the fields full of rough pasture. Villages lay ruined and empty. He realised he was now within five miles of his destination. This area had been completely cleared three years before to keep the curious away. Whole communities had been forcibly removed and all the land turned over to cattle that provided food for the creatures.

As he had been warned, he smelt the site first. It was the sour, sulphurous smell of rotting meat and animal excrement. He quickly shut the window but soon the whole carriage reeked. At first he looked for something to disperse the smell but soon realised he would have to just sit and get used to it. After another five minutes he began to pick up the strangest sounds over the noise of the carriage. There was a complete range of vocalisations from high piercing shrieks to low rumbling barks which seemed to vibrate the air out of his lungs. He had never heard or felt anything like it before and yet it seemed to find some strange terror deep within his soul.

The train slowed as it approached the compound, first passing the abandoned village of Viller-en-Cauchies and a clutch of staff buildings that lay outside the high double stockade, its walls topped with razor-sharp ribbon steel. The track ran through a pair of massive gates and into an open 'courtyard'. The site was vast, about

half a mile across, with all the cages on the outside against the stockade. At one end was a warren of smaller covered constructions that looked like a makeshift wooden shantytown. This, he knew, was where they kept the giant invertebrates. They required less space but needed darkness.

The train drew to a halt next to several of the large reinforced carriages he had seen at the railhead. The noise from the animals all around him was now deafening. This was a place of fear and terror. The assault on all the senses was overpowering. One of the train stewards stumbled into Burloff's carriage. He was white faced and retching.

Burloff swept up his coat and cap, steeled himself and headed out into the compound.

Biowaffen personnel were already loading the carriages and they had started with one of the largest cages.

The General decided not to wait for Von Heket and a formal welcome and strode towards the nearest group of men. They were gathered round the open gate of the wide-caged area. All were dressed in red and wearing plain, featureless leather masks.

At first Burloff could see nothing in the cage, and then he picked out movement in the shadows against the stockade wall. One of the men in red turned and saw him approach.

The gate was quickly closed and the man ran towards Burloff shouting, 'Get away from here!'

Burloff stood his ground. 'How dare you! Do you know who I am? I am General Burloff and I demand to see Captain Von Heket immediately.'

At that moment the shadows in the cage disgorged their secret and a huge dinosaur bounded across his enclosure and smashed into the fence closest to Burloff. The metal buckled under the power of the assault, but held.

Despite himself Burloff cried out and stumbled back, falling onto his back as he did so.

The creature loomed over him just the other side of the fence. It let out a deafening shriek and the other animals inside the compound picked up its call.

In the ensuing din, the saurian stopped and tilted its head to observe the General, just as a blackbird might size up a worm.

Burloff had never been near an animal so large. The visceral impact of such a huge, muscular predator was paralysing. A part of him, deep within, was screaming for him to run but he also knew in his soul, if he did, he would have failed. Somewhere Von Heket was watching. Slowly he got back to his feet and folded his arms so his shaking hands would not be visible. Then he stepped forward towards the creature, trusting the fence between them.

The monstrous predator in front of him must have stood over twelve-foot tall at the hip and around thirty-foot long. As it watched him it bobbed, shifting its weight from leg to leg and flexing its scythe-like claws. Running down is back from head to tail were long shiny quills that it seemed to be able to flex forward to increase its height. Its body was a mottled green and yellow, but there were red flecks in the pattern that increased in concentration towards the head, making it look like it was stained with blood. Its mouth lay open enough to reveal row after row of serrated teeth around a large blue tongue. Under its ornate brow ridges its eyes were black and, as it studied the General, it made a strange guttural clicking sound, as if it were concentrating. On top of its skull the neural plate was almost invisible under a mass of ugly bone growth.

Burloff mastered his fear and turned to ask the man in red about the plate, but he was gone. Instead he saw Von Heket approaching him from behind one of the carriages and, as he walked, he pulled a mask over his head. Burloff was satisfied that from a distance he had put on a good enough show of not being intimidated by the massive creature.

‘That was very unwise of you, Sir. You should have done as the handlers advised,’ said Von Heket.

‘Captain, I do not have to do anything your staff tell me. Whereas you, and they, have to do exactly what I say.’

‘I understand completely, General. But let me tell you a bit about the bull *Allosaurus fragilis* that stands in front of you. This was one of the first we extracted off the plateau when it was an adolescent. It is now almost fully grown. The red patterning over its head is a sign of sexual maturity and is a potent warning colour for them.’

‘That is why you dress your handlers in red. I know, Von Heket. I have read the reports.’

‘Of course, but you may not have been briefed that we recently noted that no two creatures has the same red pattern. Among these large therapods the patterns on their faces mark them as individuals. They have exceptional sight and clearly recognise faces like we do. It also turns out they hold grudges. That is why all my handlers wear masks. This bull knows you now General, and he will remember you.’

‘As long as your neural plate technology is as effective as you say then I should have no reason to be concerned, should I? Now, have you worked out how to stop them turning on our own troops?’

‘Yes, Sir. We have designed each controller to transmit a high frequency carrier signal that only the animals can hear and they associate with pain. The stronger it is the greater the fear. Essentially, they run away from the controllers.’ Von Heket tilted his head and pulled a bulky transmitting device from his belt. ‘Perhaps you would like to try it out for yourself?’

Burloff noted the allosaurus start to back away at the sight of the transmitter.

Von Heket adjusted a dial on the front and then handed it to the General. ‘Now, just flick the switch on the side,’ he said.

Burloff did so and immediately heard an electrical hum, not from the transmitter but from the plate in the creature's skull. The saurian's head twisted to one side and it crouched down, putting its forearms on the ground. Slowly its body arched in a rictus and it let out a low strangled growl.

Burloff walked to the fence and looked into the creature's face. He felt the power he had over the beast and smiled.

Von Heket was at his shoulder. 'I think the demonstration is successful, don't you sir?' and he reached forward and flicked the switch.

The monster immediately launched itself forward, clawing and biting at the fence.

Burloff tumbled backwards, again losing his footing and falling into the mud.

Von Heket stood his ground.

'You idiot!' shouted Burloff scrabbling to his feet. 'I will have you court marshalled for that. How dare you turn that machine off without consulting me!'

'Sir! I protest. For your own safety you do not want to become the object of his aggression.'

'Right, if they are that intelligent we should make an example of this one. Take it out and machine gun it in front of the others.'

Von Heket could hide behind his mask but Burloff noticed his shoulders tense.

'A clever suggestion General, but that might make them wary of all machine guns, and we need them to be fearless in the face of the enemy.'

Burloff was losing patience with their jousting. 'Just remember that these creatures are only here to serve the Army's needs, Captain.'

Von Hecket gestured to the train. ‘Perhaps you would like to observe the loading process from the safety of your carriage, Sir? The handlers have it down to a fine art and it might demonstrate how much control we can exert over the creatures. I need to attend to the protoscorpions, but I can join you in an hour to receive your instructions.’

He gave the General a short nod and left him to trudge back to the carriage brushing the mud off his coat as he went.

Inside a large man dressed in a red handler’s uniform was waiting for him. It was Baron Richter.

‘You know he did that to you deliberately, General?’

‘Of course I do!’ he snapped. ‘Well, do you have anything useful to report?’

‘He watches me very closely. It is very difficult. I think he might know that I am spying for you.’

‘Stop being so pathetic, Baron. Report!’

The Baron flinched, realising he would get no sympathy from his superior. ‘The biggest problem is the transmitter signal in the field. It is unpredictable and the range is limited. It looks like the handlers might literally have to follow the creatures to make sure they don’t turn round. ’

Burloff nodded, interested now. ‘The assault on Amiens needs to be fast. Ludendorff wants to know what you people can offer?’

‘I would suggest an invertebrate attack at night again.’

‘I am not interested in what you suggest. What will Von Heket say?’

‘He will definitely say the same. The attractant research, that I actually initiated, has borne fruit. We can flood an area with scent bombs. The inverts will follow it in, attacking anything that moves.

After about ten hours the scent disperses, allowing creature collection.'

Burloff looked back at the allosaurus cage and saw three handlers cautiously enter and spread out. In the shadows the giant predator crouched, ready to attack. The middle handler activated the neural clamp and started to move forward.

To start with, the animals's head twisted, then it suddenly straightened and it let out a cough. Clearly the handlers were not expecting this and backed off quickly. The man with the transmitter double checked his instrument and made some further adjustments. Again the animal's head twisted to the side.

'That is another issue,' commented Richter from behind him. 'They have noticed this in animals with the oldest implants. It is as if they are becoming resistant to the neural clamps. One of the advantages of these creatures is they have extraordinary powers of regeneration. They are able to recover from the most severe wounds and even extensive surgery. The same qualities might be helping the animal to bypass over-stimulated pain centres. And that would be an unfortunate development.'

'All fascinating, I am sure,' responded Burloff. 'Have you found out any more about what is going on in the Black Forest?'

'As I have mentioned before, Von Heket has created three parallel organisations – at Aachen, here in Villers and in Emmendingen. There is no movement of personnel between them, no communication at all. He is the only person, as far as I can make out, that knows everything that is going on.'

'Have you heard from Reissinger, or Neuer? I placed them in Emmendingen months ago.'

Richter shrugged 'Nothing', and then pointed. 'Look, the clamp is working.'

In the cage two handlers had ropes round the beast's neck and were pulling it, stumbling, through the gate towards the carriage that would transport it. The third man was attaching the transmitter to the vehicle's battery so it would continue to subdue the allosaurus for the journey.

Burloff nodded. 'Find out about the Black Forest. Will another invert attack work?'

'In my opinion...' Richter checked himself. 'Yes. There is no sign the British have worked out what happened at Villers-Bretonneux. The ruined buildings are just how the protoscorpions like it. They will be hungry too; we stopped feeding them two months ago. It will be a slaughterhouse.'

'I will tell him they have to be on the move tomorrow. Now get out of here before he comes back.'

Richter turned to go just as Burloff added. 'And find out why Von Heket smells so strange. If it is his soap then it is the strangest perfume I have ever come across.'

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

'I did think I was going mad. High Wood was the most brutal fighting I have ever experienced in this brutal war. The Londons were being mowed down by the hundreds. And there I was lying in the stinking mud of a flooded crater when I heard it. A call I had not heard for four years; a screech straight from the plateau. Mad or not I decided I had to find out what had made that sound or I would die trying.'

Milly sat upright, her hands clenched together, as she listened to Captain Malone's story of how he survived the Somme offensive.

They were in a cellar in a derelict house on the outskirts of a small town called Corbie. His fellow saboteurs were out looking for a stray German soldier they could kidnap and interrogate. While they waited, Malone told his tale.

'Once I reached their trenches I started to smell the plateau too. The sweet stench of rotting carrion those monsters carry with them. I turned a corner and there was this huge shape filling the trench. For a moment I could not work out what it was. It wasn't a colour or shape I recognised but it was definitely a huge animal. It just lay there gurgling. One thing that confused me was that it was wearing a heavy leather harness and then, almost too late, I realised that it had to be a bomb. There was a click and a hiss so I turned and ran.'

He stopped and rubbed his twisted jaw. 'It is all a bit vague after that. Best I can work out, my body was picked up by a Hun clean-up crew. I have no idea why they didn't just shoot me, maybe they didn't want to waste a bullet. Instead they threw me on what smelt and felt like a pile of roasted offal and carted me out of there. Throughout it all I was conscious, but I could not do anything about it. I could feel my teeth on my tongue but I couldn't spit them out. I swallowed them in the end. I prayed for death but it wouldn't come.'

By the light of a single candle she saw his strange, damaged face struggle with the emotion of reliving the horror of battle.

'I was dumped in a large hole but they did not back fill it because night fell. Somehow, in the darkness, I found the strength to crawl out. They found me about a hundred yards away the next morning and sent me off to a prison camp.'

'Did they treat your wounds?' asked Milly.

'No. No one gave a damn. I was left to rot. But, you see, I just would not die. I healed. Very slowly, but I did heal.'

'That is an extraordinary story, Captain Malone. I have seen men die from a lost finger yet your body …' She was lost for words. She wanted to say something to help but didn't know what to say. 'I bet you will be glad to get home.'

Malone did not say anything for a moment, just looked at her.

'I am home, Ms Summerlee. This is where I belong.'

'But …' Milly was interrupted by a low whistle from the door.

Malone leapt up and let his companions in. They were dragging a German soldier with a sack over his head. He appeared unconscious.

Milly watched as they roughly lifted him onto a chair and tied his hands to its back legs. A young Welshman with dark curly hair, whom she had been introduced to as Lieutenant David Jones, pushed the soldier's head back and yanked off the sack.

'Careful!' cried Milly. 'If you knocked him out I need to check if he has concussion.'

Jones and the others laughed. 'Calm yourself, Nursey. We didn't knock him out. Didn't need to. He's falling down drunk.'

Malone leant close to Milly. 'Stupid buggers. Things are so bad in Germany, most of these boys haven't seen decent food or drink in

months. The brewery in Corbie has been irresistible.'

'Do you really think a soldier this young will know about the creatures?'

'No. But we have to start somewhere. I realise now I have to finish the journey I started at High Wood and find out what the bloody hell the bastards are up to.'

The soldier looked about seventeen. He clearly had not started shaving and Milly noticed he had been sick down his front.

He rolled his head around and groaned.

Jones suddenly slapped him hard across the cheek. Milly flinched and then he did it again.

The boy roused himself and tried to focus on Malone who was standing in front of him. Initially it was impossible to get anything out of him but slowly Malone, speaking fluent German, began to get through.

'Erzahlen Sie mir von die Monstern!' Malone barked.

The lad grinned and waggled his head. Malone knelt in front of him and repeated the question again.

'Wir haben den Teufel auf unserer Seite,' he gurgled.

Malone stood. 'He says they have the Devil on their side.'

'Seine Damonen sind am Bahnhof,' the boy added and his head slumped forward again.

'His demons are at the station apparently,' translated Malone.

'Oh, come on, Sir,' said Jones. 'This is a waste of time. There are no such things as monsters and demons.'

'I didn't imagine that giant centipede,' protested Milly. 'It killed my best friend in front of my eyes.'

‘It was far, far from here, and a very long time ago, but I too have seen these things, Taff,’ added Malone. ‘They were not demons, but they were real enough. We can’t just ignore what might be going on here.’

‘Captain, what are your orders?’

‘We are going to Amiens railway station. I want to see what is going on for myself.’

‘What?! You mean to go where half the German army is gathering?’

‘Yes, Lieutenant, that is exactly what I mean. Now, it is getting busy outside and it will be dawn soon. We need to get out of here.’

Suddenly the young German started to shout. ‘Wir werden alle sterben!’

Jones grabbed him and put his hand over his mouth.

‘Einige fruher als andere,’ growled Malone. ‘McLaren, go and check whether the coast is clear. Ms Summerlee, please go with him.’

Milly hesitated. She had been shaken by the crude interrogation and was only too happy to get out of that cellar, but she was concerned about the German.

‘Don’t worry, we’ll tidy up in here. Now go,’ insisted Malone.

Milly followed McLaren out, up some stairs to a small door that lead to the street. Like every town and village for miles around, Corbie lay mostly in ruins. It had sat behind the Front for months and suffered constant bombardment. Nearby she could make out the impressive twin towers of the abbey, somehow still standing, but there was little else left of the once mighty building.

The street contained a few drunken soldiers, but Milly could see the way they had arrived was clear. Without consulting McLaren she ran back down the stairs to let Malone know.

The small group of men seemed surprised to see her. Jones was putting the sackcloth back over the young German's head.

'All clear,' said Milly.

'Right, yes.' said Malone. 'Come on.'

As they started to file out of the cellar Milly looked back at the drunk German. She worried his head was lolling at an unnatural angle but just as she was about to go over and check him, Malone grabbed her hand and dragged her up the stairs.

'Please, Ms Summerlee. We must hurry.'

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Gradually the strange calls of the creatures began to return. Thomas sat up and, for the first time, took in his surroundings. The ground he was lying on was covered in a thick layer of dead ferns. Around them black cyathea stems stretched up to huge spreading green leaves. Nearby the gnarled trunk of a much larger tree disappeared through the fern canopy.

As Thomas looked at the massive bough he realised something was watching him from behind its roots. Pinpoint black eyes stared out from a feathery little brown head. Suddenly the whole creature popped out and started to slowly stalk towards him. It was only about two foot long with a body covered in mottled brown shaggy feathers. It was neither mammal, bird nor reptile as far as he could make out. As it advanced, it spread out its arms and lifted its long tail to reveal a bright red fan. Thomas realised, with some surprise, that the little creature was being aggressive towards him. Slowly it came closer and started to hiss, flexing its tiny needle like claws.

Thomas felt a damp patch on his back. Keeping an eye on his colourful adversary he felt behind, quite expecting to find he was bleeding. But when he checked his hand it was covered in yolk and shell.

Thomas jumped to his feet. ‘Sorry. It was an accident.’

The distraught mother now scampered over to the nest he had been lying on. Desperately she tried to reorganise the mound that he had crushed, occasionally stopping to give him a furious hiss.

Thomas was distracted by Roxton groaning.

‘You alright, Lord John?’

‘It’s my leg. The knock must have shifted shrapnel in it. Here, you will have to give me a hand up.’

Thomas pulled Roxton up. He was obviously in some pain but, just as he got his arm round his shoulder, Thomas felt a sharp stab in his own leg. He looked down to see the little creature attempting to bite his calf.

‘What is that? A killer chicken?’ said Roxton.

Thomas shook his leg violently throwing her back against the tree. ‘I have no idea – it would help if I could take a closer look at her teeth.’

‘Stay here much longer and I am sure she will oblige.’

In the distance came the clear sound of a whistle; three short blasts, then a break and then three more. This was repeated several times.

‘Well, what a relief! Sounds like Gregory survived,’ said Roxton.

‘Come on,’ said Thomas. ‘We had better get over there before he busts a blood vessel. Can you manage?’

Slowly they retraced their steps out onto the beach.

The sun was beginning to set and against a brilliant orange sky Thomas could see the massive superstructure of the airship lay twisted and burning. A black column of smoke rose high into the gathering night. The sand beside the lake was littered with smaller fires and bits of blackened cloth. To one side of the wreck stood

Captain Gregory, blowing his whistle. About half a dozen men had gathered round him and one was kneeling next to a man who was lying down. When Gregory saw them he beckoned them over impatiently.

Neither Thomas nor Roxton felt like hurrying but, as they approached, Gregory barked, 'Typical you two bastards survived. Where's Roberts?'

Others were coming out of the jungle but there was no sign of the Corporal. For once Gregory was not just angry, there seemed to be a hint of genuine concern in his voice.

Thomas shrugged.

Gregory just threw his arms in the air. 'Right, Bingham, keep blowing this whistle and see if there are any more stragglers. My guess is we must have lost about 20 men. Shit! And the captain is badly burnt.'

Thomas sat Roxton down and went to the captain. One of the crew was holding his hand and talking to him, but you didn't need to be a doctor to see he was beyond help. There wasn't an inch of skin that wasn't charred and, although Thomas could see he was breathing, he was not conscious. He decided there was little he could do except to give him some morphine from his backpack.

As he prepared the injection, Gregory walked up next to him.

'Wasn't she in the rear gondola with you? Didn't you keep an eye on her?'

'I beg your pardon. She is your responsibility not mine, Captain. In case you had forgotten, this whole expedition is *your* responsibility. I thought being in charge was about more than just shouting at people. She's probably burnt to a crisp along with …'

He did not finish his sentence. With remarkable agility, Gregory swung his leg under Thomas, flipping him onto his back. Then he was on him and Thomas felt a sharp blade at his neck.

‘Listen you little shit. You start getting smart with me and I will leave you here in the sand to bleed out. You may not have noticed but Plan A is lying smouldering on the beach over there. If there are any Germans on this plateau, they sure as hell know about us now and, if we survive them, we are going to have to fucking walk out of here! So I need every good man I have and that includes Corporal Freya Roberts. But it does not include you and the limping Lord.’

‘Captain!’ It was Roxton’s voice accompanied by the click of a Webley hammer.

Gregory flinched.

‘Please, kindly put that knife down and step away from Dr Challenger.’

For a moment Thomas saw Gregory weighing whether Roxton really would shoot if he ignored him.

Fortunately the crewman holding the airship captain’s hand came to Thomas’s rescue. ‘Dr Challenger! Sir!’

Gregory rolled off Thomas and let him attend the dying man.

The captain was starting to convulse. As Thomas got to him, he shuddered and stopped breathing. He checked his pulse. The captain was dead.

Thomas looked at the others and shook his head. For a moment no one said anything.

Then Roxton holstered his pistol and spoke. ‘We must bury him.’

‘No,’ said Thomas. ‘If we bury him the local animals will have him up again in no time. Better he is burnt with the others than eaten.’

Gregory started barking orders again. He was setting up camp for the night, detailing his men to stand picket in case of attack, scour the area for supplies and cremate the captain. He was like a man possessed.

Thomas was beginning to worry about Roberts. She had been towards the rear of the ship and that meant she should have survived. He walked away from the camp to the aft-most point of the wreck and then turned away from the lake and plunged into the line of tree ferns. .

‘Corporal Roberts! Roberts…! Freya!’ he shouted.

‘What?’ came an irritated response from a clump of sword fern.

‘Fre… Corporal! What are you doing? Are you alright?’

‘Have you seen these, doctor?’ she said and stood up. Cupped in her hand was a tiny brown ball of feathers no bigger than a wren. ‘It’s like a tiny baby bird, but it has a tail and teeth. It is a dinosaur with feathers on it. You know what this means, don’t you?’

‘Yes, and I think I met its angry aunty over there. I would suggest you put it back before its mother returns. There will be time for science later, for now we are going to have to stick with the group. Your Captain is beside himself.’

She smiled and reluctantly put the chick back before following Thomas to the lake where Roxton was waiting, smoking.

As they approached he pushed a package back into his knapsack. ‘Lake Gladys,’ said Roxton loudly. ‘Always knew I would see it again one day. Stupid name Malone gave it. Long story.’

He turned and frowned. ‘Roberts, your boss, the Captain, is a liability. I think we should openly discuss who should be in charge now that his plan has gone up in smoke.’

Roberts held Roxton’s look. ‘He is the toughest man I know. You should work with him, my Lord, instead of against him.’

For a moment the two just looked at each other, until Thomas decided to break the standoff. ‘It would help if you stopped goading him and stayed off that stuff Rodrigues gave you,’ he said.

Roxton grinned and took a deep drag of his rollie. ‘Just harmless shag, my lad. Helps with the pain in the leg anyway.’

Roberts turned and headed back to the wreck, calling Gregory’s name.

‘Watch that one, Thomas. She’s a sharp’un,’ said Roxton.

Thomas changed the subject. ‘Where do you think we should head first?’

‘The Accala Indian caves. If the Germans came up to this plateau, it must have been through the cave system. Their base might be there.’

‘Are you up to it?’

Roxton smiled and nodded to his cigarette. ‘With a little medicinal help. Anyway we are not going anywhere until the morning and after a good night’s rest I will be right as rain. Come on, let’s try and persuade the grumpy Captain the caves were his idea all along.’

The night was cool and pleasant however few slept. Whether it was the trauma of the crash, the fear of German scouts or the unutterable strangeness of the sounds coming out of the jungle most spent the night scanning the dark lake shores. Just before dawn Thomas saw the waters just beyond the smouldering airship part and a huge head silently rise up. It was long and sleek shaped and would have perhaps looked like a giant horse but its mouth was a picket fence of sharp over-lapping teeth. For a while its dead blank eyes scanned the scene as its nostrils flared taking in the alien smells of burning canvass. Then as quietly as it appeared it dropped beneath the surface again. He shivered and pulled his coat closer.

At first light the party had gathered together. There were twenty-five of them including Roxton, Challenger, Gregory and Roberts. Most of the airship crew had perished with their craft. All the soldiers had hung on to their weapons as they jumped clear of the crash, but there was a sad lack of food. Gregory had saved two of the sub

machine guns and had the presence of mind to throw an ammunition crate out of a window just before they had crashed.

Roxton estimated the Indian caves were probably about a day's walk away and Gregory felt they would make quicker progress by sticking to the lake shore for as long as possible. However, when Thomas mentioned what he saw in its waters the previous night the Captain reconsidered. A brief recce discovered there was a clear trail through the jungle heading in the right direction about a hundred yards in from the lake.

During all their preparations there was no sign of any other humans, Germans or natives. Despite this, Thomas could not help feel they were being watched. Rather than leave the smouldering airship to find safety, he fancied they would probably find greater dangers in the deep jungle.

Gregory organised the group in single file to negotiate the game trail but, as they set off, Thomas noticed the path became wider than that. In places tree limbs had been cut and plants cleared. If this was a path created by the Germans, there were also signs it had not been used for a while. Green shoots were pushing up in the middle and, occasionally, branches had fallen across it. After a couple of miles they came across an open sandy area covered with low pineapple-looking plants. Mist raised by the morning sun formed a layer above their blooms and gave the whole clearing a mystical feel. The scent was over powering.

'I recognise these plants,' said Roxton.

Thomas nodded. 'Professor Summerlee would be beside himself. They are the same species of bennettite as he had in his front room and they are in flower.' He reached into his pocket and pulled out the cone he had taken from the Rodrigues' lunch table. 'Their scent is also popular in Para.'

Thomas breathed in the untouched beauty of the place. As he did the forward scout came running back. The path ahead ran down to a

stream and he had heard the sounds of a very large creature.

Gregory broke the group up and they slowly approached through the cover of the undergrowth.

Soon Thomas could hear long mournful bellows, punctuated with what sounded like bouts of throaty coughs. He dropped down on his belly and started to crawl through the fern undergrowth. As he did he realised he could feel the bellows vibrating through the dark organic soil beneath him. He stopped and felt the effect in his chest. It made him smile and as hard as he could he did not feel threatened by the noise. Moving forward he parted the last of the ferns and he saw the source. A monstrous stegosaur stood in a sunny patch by the running water, rocking slowly from side to side. For a moment he just held his breath. Here he was, following in his father's footsteps, staring across the chasm of deep time at his prehistoric past.
The animal in front of him seemed almost too big to be real. Its scales, plates, spikes and scutes all shone in the sunlight like some grotesque phantasm. At one end a tail with four fearsome spines swished back and forth. At the other a disproportionately small head jerked from side to side with each call. In between its huge flanks rose out of the low horsetails topped by large red diamond-shaped plates. These ran in alternate pairs down its back and their colour seemed to leak down its sides forming wide red stripes against its green-grey skin.

Then he noticed something was not right. Its movements seemed clumsy and stiff and, as the sun caught its back plates, he saw they had several holes in them. He heard Gregory loading the MP 18.

Thomas broke cover and ran forward to within thirty feet of the creature to get a closer look. Its tiny head shot up and started sniffing the air. It bellowed and began waving its spiked tail frantically. This, however, only made it stumble backwards.

Now he was close he could see the animal was blind and its flanks were covered in large scars. It was so badly injured it could hardly

walk, let alone attack anyone.

Thomas turned back to the others. ‘Someone has been using this animal as target practice. It is covered in bullet wounds,’ he shouted.

One by one the others came out of the undergrowth. The huge dinosaur started to become more agitated and its aggressive bellows became more high pitched and desperate, but it still wasn’t moving anywhere.

Roberts ran up and stood next to him. ‘That is both the most magnificent and saddest thing I have seen in my entire life,’ she muttered.

‘That back left leg isn’t working at all,’ said Thomas. ‘As long as no one goes and stands next to his tail, he is no danger to us.’

At the edge of the clearing Gregory scowled at him and then began to lead his men past.

Roxton put his hand on Thomas’s shoulder. ‘There is nothin’ you can do for it, young fella’.’

‘God these creatures must be tough. How long has it survived like this? I am surprised one of the larger carnivores has not finished him off by now.’

‘Maybe they have all been taken by the Germans,’ said Roxton.

He desperately wanted to do something for this tragic animal but he knew it was hopeless. Reluctantly Thomas turned his back on the mutilated stegosaurus. He couldn’t help thinking that, whilst he felt he was walking in his father’s footsteps, this was not how his father had discovered life on the plateau.

The group continued in silence for three more hours, working their way first around the lake and then gently uphill towards the volcanic cliffs that held the Indian caves. Along the way the dense green jungle round them was full of the sounds of creatures, but Thomas saw few of the wonders his father’s experience suggested. By the

afternoon the path they were on grew wider as other paths joined it from elsewhere on the plateau. At one point they came across an abandoned cart. It was well built out of hardwood with a harness for some creature to pull it. The axle was broken and it had been rolled over into the undergrowth, which was now busy reclaiming it.

'I am pretty sure the Germans abandoned this place long ago,' said Thomas, inspecting the cart.

'We should be prepared for anything,' replied Captain Gregory. 'We must be close now and I want every gun ready in case we have to fight.'

As they moved off Thomas heard a movement in the undergrowth. He stopped and listened, expecting some animal to appear, but there was nothing.

'I heard it too,' said Roxton next to him. 'I think whatever it is has been following us since the crash site. Hurry up, lad. We must stick together.'

After another mile the scout alerted them again. He had spotted the caves.

Roxton, Thomas and Gregory worked their way forward to take a look. There were the ruddy basalt cliffs that Thomas had read about in his father's papers, with the caves in the soft stratum of rock that ran about eighty feet off the ground. But now there was a lot more.

On the grassy slope below, where once the first expedition had befriended the Accala natives, there was now a huge wooden stockade. It clung dark and forbidding to the cliff walls like a territorial beast, awaiting their arrival. The high timber walls must have enclosed about two acres and every bitumen-stained stake that made up its outer wall ended in a viscous spike.

Roxton smiled grimly at Gregory. 'Well, Captain, what's the plan? Frontal assault with twenty knackered men and a couple of sub-machine guns?'

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

In the darkness, pairs of black shiny-segmented legs wrapped round her body. Milly struggled but, for each one she worked free, another two appeared and clamped her tight. Eventually her arms could not move at all and her legs hung uselessly beneath her. Ahead, a clutch of red mouthparts appeared, clicking and sliding against each other. She opened her mouth to scream but no words came out. She could not even breathe.

She woke, taking a huge gasp for air and finding she had become wrapped up in the heavy overcoat Malone had given her. She sat up and groaned as all the bruises she had collected over the past two days made themselves felt.

She was sitting on a dusty mattress in the attic of an abandoned house in Amiens. At one end, a hole in the roof let the warm evening light spill through, picking out the motes of dust her coat had thrown up. Beyond the light, she noticed someone was squatting down and watching her.

'Have you got something you want to say to me, Lieutenant?' said Milly quietly.

It was Lieutenant David Jones. Since Corbie she had been very wary of him. He clearly did not agree with the decision to sneak into Amiens and she suspected he had needlessly murdered the young German soldier.

'You seem to have a pretty way with the Captain, so who am I to doubt you,' he said. 'I mean, here we are in the middle of Amiens, which by the hour is filling up with more Hun than Berlin, and why? To spot monsters!'

'Believe me, I understand. I didn't believe it either. Neither did the lads at Villers-Bretonneux. And that is the point. They had no idea what attacked them. Otherwise I am sure they would have defended

themselves better. We need to find out what the Germans are up to before more troops face the same nasty surprise.' She stopped herself, realizing she sounded exactly like Thomas.

'We were doing good work disrupting their supply lines until you came along.'

'Taff,' came a deep voice from the door. 'Get down stairs and keep watch.'

Jones jumped as Malone walked into the room. He saluted his Captain and gave Milly a look as he left the room.

'Ignore him,' said Malone. 'He is just frightened and wants someone to blame. I will have a word later. Glad you are awake. We have a good vantage point to see over the marshaling yards. I have never seen such activity.'

As he talked she noticed he turned away from her, conscious of his appearance.

'Occasionally you can hear them,' he said as he led her to a ladder that took them into the apex of the roof. 'And I can definitely smell them. Shit and rotten meat, if you will forgive my French.'

He had found an old four-story railway hotel outside the Gare d'Amiens. They climbed the ladder and settled down on a plank next to small hole in the roof tiles that overlooked the sidings.

'Now, keep low and don't move your head around too much. You don't want to catch anyone's eye and it is movement that most easily attracts attention.'

Milly couldn't escape the feeling Malone was actually enjoying himself. But this wasn't some naïve youngster seeking a bubble reputation. He had seen the worse of the war and it had left its scars. Yet he seemed to seek out more danger, as if he had a death wish. This could not be right. No man could enjoy the war.

'They have been busy,' he whispered.

Milly turned to look at the spectacle in front of her. She had never seen so many carriages and engines. Nearly every track was occupied and the sidings seemed to stretch for miles. To the east she could see more trains arriving. Most of the carriages were large, black windowless boxes, giving the whole scene a sinister feel. This wasn't helped by the foul smell that filled the air.

'This is a disaster,' Malone continued.. 'Our boys must have run out of here so fast they left everything intact. Hun have been trying and failing to take Amiens since '14, and now they've taken control in a couple of days. Look! What do you make of them?'

A small group of men were moving between the black carriages, adjusting something on the side of each container. They all wore strange red uniforms and some had sinister-looking masks on.

'I have no idea. Do you think those carriages are full of giant centipedes?' asked Milly.

'No, that is not what I am smelling. On the plateau we met some really big, ugly saurians. It is their perfume I can smell. I am guessing they have a whole menagerie in those coaches.'

'How have they done all this? There must be hundreds of creatures down there!'

Together they sat in silence and watched the busy sidings. Every so often Milly stole a glance at Malone. When she was a young girl this man had been like a God to her - famous, handsome and so charming. Yet now he was a different person.

'It is alright,' he said. 'It doesn't hurt, if that is what you are thinking.'

'What? No I wasn't … Not the scar. Actually, I know someone who can help you with that, but that isn't …' Milly stopped drew a breath and started again. 'What did you mean, this is your home now?'

Malone thought for a moment before replying. 'I have changed. Evolved if you will. Just like your old father used to say – 'adapted to my environment'. Can you imagine me back in the salons of Mayfair looking like this?'

'I understand but no one should call *this* home,' she protested. 'It is a slaughter house.'

'There!' Malone interrupted. 'A general! I bet he is the one in charge.'

About a hundred yards from their vantage point a sharp-faced officer was watching a truck being decoupled from the rest and an engine pulling it clear. A number of other high-ranking officers were standing around him waiting for it. As it stopped several red uniformed men ran forward and unlocked the side doors, others stood about with long, sharpened poles.

The general stepped forward, holding a metal box in his hands.

As the doors were opened Milly felt her stomach lurch. Out stumbled the largest creature she had ever seen. It was a huge, carnivorous dinosaur, standing on two legs, with a long tail and powerful head. It was shocking enough to see such a thing alive, but what instantly struck Milly was its terrible beauty. Its body was covered in deep violet stripes with speckled blue green patches in between. There was a crest running down its back, which was all violet except for black flecks that on closer inspection appeared to be patches of shaggy like pelt. These decreased towards the head, which was almost completely violet except for black areas around its eyes.

'Bingo,' said Malone grimly. 'I knew the world would not forget the plateau. The Germans remembered. Allosaurus, I think your father called it.'

'No,' said Milly. 'It has a crest running down its back and its arms are too small. I don't recognize the species.'

Malone smiled. 'Like father, like daughter.'

As the creature attempted to stand it let out an ear-piercing screech and collapsed to the floor. Its right leg was sticking out sideways at an unnatural angle. Its scream was picked up by the other trapped animals and suddenly the yard was full of bellows, barks and shrieks. Half-mad with pain the saurian started to snap violently at the soldiers gathered around it, each slam of its jaw reverberating through the sidings. Milly felt a sob rise in her chest.

The general, who had been standing back from this, lifted his box high and turned a dial.

Almost instantly the creature's head dropped to the floor and it stopped thrashing about.

'He's controlling it in some way with that box,' muttered Malone.

'Poor creature,' said Milly. 'It's in agony.'

Malone scoffed. 'I wouldn't start feeling too sorry for it. It would be happy enough to eat you whole.'

'I know that! But can't you see it is terrified.' Her voice quivered with emotion. 'This whole ghastly place stinks of fear and it can't understand what is going on.'

Malone remained expressionless. 'We need to get hold of one of those boxes. If those control the dinosaurs in some way then we need to get one to our boffins.'

The general handed over the box to another officer and walked up close to the creature's head. He reached in his pocket and pulled out a pistol.

'No!' cried Milly as she realized what he was about to do. He fired into dinosaur's skull at point blank range, again and again until the magazine was empty.

'How can a human be so vile?' she whispered as tears broke down her cheek.

Malone shook his head. ‘In the end we are going to have to do the same. They are just doing our job for us.’ He looked at the setting sun. ‘There is only another hour of light and we have to prepare. Looks like they’re in such a hurry that they have not set proper guards. This shouldn’t be too difficult.’

He clambered back down the ladder leaving Milly staring at the scene in front of her. The group of soldiers began to disperse, but the general remained as a pool of blood grew around the creature’s head and lapped over the toes of his boots.

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General Burloff was satisfied his cruel killing of the saurian had the desirable effect on Von Heket. He felt he was beginning to work out his secretive captain. The creatures themselves were his Achilles Heel. He cared too much for them. He had met people like him before, people who loved their dogs or horses more than humans and, understanding that fact, gave the general something to hurt Von Heket with.

He noticed the blood was now around his boots and, as he stepped away, he saw Von Heket staring at him.

‘This is unacceptable,’ Burloff observed. ‘We cannot afford to lose valuable animals like this just because the train breaks too hard.’

Von Heket struggled to keep the emotion out of his voice. ‘They do have extraordinary powers of recovery. We might have been able to mend that leg.’

‘We have no time, you idiot. This is not a petting zoo. These are machines of war and they have to work, and work now!’

‘I understand, General. As far as I can tell only the largest theropods have been affected and this animal was the most seriously injured.’

Burloff pulled a telegram out of his pocket. ‘This is from Ludendorff himself. He congratulates us on our success in taking Amiens, but

points out it will be all for nothing unless we keep going and cut off the British 3rd and 5th Armies. We are to push on to Abbeville immediately. I intend to take the city, even if I have to leave every one of your animals dead by the side of the road. Do I make myself clear, Captain?'

Without waiting for a reply, Burloff turned and walked away, heading for his luxurious carriage to replace his blood-stained boots.

When he arrived he found Baron Richter waiting for him. He groaned and sat down heavily in an armchair. The last thing he felt like, at the moment, was listening to the Baron's paranoid suspicions and fears. This evening he looked particularly nervous.

'What can I do for you, Baron?'

'I have found a handler who has been to the castle in Emmendingen and he is willing to talk to me.'

'Help me with these boots will you. So, why are you bothering me now? Come to me when you have something' He enjoyed the look of disgust on the Baron's face as he tugged the boots off, getting blood on his hands.

'He has agreed to meet me tonight, but he is terrified,' replied Richter, reluctantly wiping his hands on his uniform. 'The Captain has spies everywhere. I promised that you would give him protection if he talks.'

'Why can't he just come here and tell me?' said Burloff wearily.

'Too frightened he will never make it here. Maybe you could arrest Von Heket, sir.'

'You would like that, wouldn't you, Baron? Get your own back. But, unlike you, he does seem to be vital to this operation. I will deal with him when he is no longer of any use. Now, take me to this man of yours. He had better have something useful to tell me or I will feed *you* to the dinosaurs.'

Burloff was as keen as ever to find out what Von Heket was doing at the Black Forest facility but, at this moment, it was not a priority and he was beginning to regret keeping Richter. Although there was no question the Baron was dedicated to the task of spying on Von Heket, he seemed just as useless at it as he had been at running the Biowaffen Unit.

It was getting dark as Burloff stepped out of his carriage and followed the Baron off across the sidings to an engineering shed near the main building. The yard was still busy and, in the poor light, they had to stumble across the tracks and hop between moving coaches.

When Richter reached the shed doors he stopped and listened. He whistled three times, but there was no response. The night air was full of the noise of engines shunting so it was impossible to hear anything from inside.

'Oh, this is ridiculous,' said Burloff pushing past him, 'I have had enough of all this cloak and dagger stuff.'

He opened the door and strode inside. The large space was full of huge pieces of machinery, wheels, boilers, engines and pistons, all the entrails of trains eviscerated and lying on benches. A few small wall lights seemed to create more shadows than they dispelled.

The General stood in the centre of the shed as Richter hung back by the door. 'Come on, man! Show yourself. I do not have all night.'

Richter tried whistling again.

Burloff was about to lose his temper with him when there was the sound of movement behind a boiler and something metal fell on the concrete floor.

'For the last time come out and show yourself,' said Burloff. He took a few steps forward to the source of the noise.

Richter started hissing at him from the shed door but he ignored him.

Burloff picked up a large wrench and walked boldly around the boiler. There was nothing the other side, just an empty bench. He slammed the wrench down. ‘Right! Richter you are wasting my time.’

But as he turned back towards the door he saw Richter was no longer standing by the door. He was lying on the concrete and a creature was standing over him, hissing. It was about seven-foot-long, had smooth waxy skin and its massive jaws were closed over Richter’s head.

Silently the Baron’s hand was reaching forward as strings of drool wrapped his face.

As Burloff watched, the monster’s cheek muscles bulged and heard the Baron’s skull pop.

The General turned and ran to the back of the shed. He spotted a wooden door and threw himself at it without breaking step. The latch gave easily and he stumbled out on to a busy, well-lit concourse. As he glanced behind him to see if he was being pursued he collided with a group of storm troopers and was sent sprawling to the ground.

The moment the soldiers spotted his rank they all jumped to attention and saluted, too intimidated to help him up.

For a moment he lay still watching the darkness behind the broken door in case the lithe shape of the predator came darting out. But nothing moved. Somewhere out of sight the creature was consuming Richter.

‘Arrgh!’ screamed Burloff in anger and frustration. He had been terrified. He had been made to look a fool but, worst of all, he had been out maneuvered. He got to his feet and pushed the nervous

storm troopers aside. Sitting at a table nearby, smoking, were a group of red uniformed Biowaffen handlers.

'You miserable cretins!' he raged at the handlers. 'There is an escapee in that shed. It has just killed somebody and you just sit there smoking! Get in there and contain the creature. Now!'

The men jumped to their feet and reluctantly started moving towards the broken door. Crimson with rage Burloff began to push them towards the shed.

'General!' It was Von Heket running down the platform with his own handlers.

Burloff wrestled with his anger, trying to compose himself for a confrontation with the Captain.

'I have been looking everywhere for you, sir. We have an emergency.'

'You bet we do,' said Burloff. 'Get in there and sort it out.'

Von Heket looked confused. 'There has been a raid. They took a neural controller.'

Burloff found himself playing catch up again. He had to buy himself time to work out what Von Heket was playing at. He straightened his coat.

'How did you let this happen? What are you doing about it?' he said.

'Sir, you ordered the security guards to be reassigned to supplies last night,' protested Von Heket.

'I asked you a damn question. What are you doing to get that controller back?!'

'A sentry managed to wing one of them. Can I suggest we use one of the unclamped gorgonopsids to hunt them down? They have an

exceptional sense of smell and, once they have the scent of someone's blood, they can track them for miles.'

'Have I seen one of these gorgonopids before?'

'Gorgonopsids. No, sir. But if we act quickly I guarantee they will track the raiders.'

Burloff considered his options. They couldn't let the controller fall into enemy hands and this idea had merits, whatever the gorgonopsids were. But, most of all, he liked the fact Von Heket was sticking his neck out. It was almost worth losing the controller to see Von Heket fail.

He turned to the men waiting by the door. 'What are you waiting for? Get in there and catch that escapee. Kill it if you have to.'

Then he turned and nodded his assent to Von Heket, letting him lead the way to where the sentries had found a splash of blood left by the wounded raider.

There they waited in silence, as the Captain's 'blood hounds' were collected. Soon four handlers appeared, each pair holding a rigid metal lead so the two gorgonopsids were restrained between them.

Burloff gasped. They were black, powerful dog-like creatures. Snapping and hissing at everyone around them he recognized them instantly. They were the same as the creature in the shed.

Von Heket smiled benignly at him. 'Don't worry, General. The moment they smell blood they will focus completely on that.'

He picked up a cane, wrapped the end in a handkerchief and then mopped up the patch of blood. As he approached the gorgonopsids they began to waggle and drool with excitement. Briefly he wiped the end of their noses with the bloody cloth.

The effect was immediate. The foul creatures calmed and stretched out their necks searching for the scent.

Von Heket lit the cloth to destroy it and then stood back.

‘Everybody back. Now release them!’

The handlers twisted their restraints and the gorgonopsids were free.

The two black, lizard-dogs stepped forward cautiously, still raptured by the scent of blood. For a moment everybody held their breath and then they sped off into the night, their sleek bodies swinging from side to side, low to the ground.

Von Heket turned back to Burloff in triumph. ‘We will have that controller back in no time, General.’

Burloff walked up to him so his face was very close and then he whispered. ‘One of those abominations just attacked me in an engineering shed. I wonder where it got my scent from. Where are my boots, you bastard?’

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Captain Gregory had withdrawn his men into a huddle and was whispering to them urgently, waving his arms and pointing at the

forbidding stockade just beyond the trees. It was clear from their responses there was some disagreement about what to do next. Thomas watched from a distance, dismayed by the apparent lack of planning.

Slowly the group broke up, without an apparent sense of purpose. Roberts wandered over.

'Well?' said Thomas.

'The Captain has a plan, but he is meeting some resistance from the others,' she replied.

'I am not surprised. Even if there are only ten Germans left in there we would never stand a chance. Someone should have anticipated this.'

Roxton ignored him and just stared at the huge stockade.

'Maybe they did,' said Roberts. 'They just didn't plan on the airship crashing.'

'What do you think, Lord Roxton?'

Roxton smiled. 'I think we should just get on with it, young 'un.'

He turned and strode over to Gregory.

'May I suggest Dr Challenger and I approach the fort alone,' said Roxton. 'They will know we have arrived and are probably hidin' in wait. Better we two flush them out, rather than your entire force be compromised.'

Gregory looked mildly surprised, but could clearly find no fault in the suggestion. 'You are free to do what you bloody like I suppose. I will hold the men here and wait for your signal,' replied Gregory.

'A single shot,' suggested Roxton.

Gregory nodded and went back to his men. Roxton stretched his stiff leg. 'How different it was last time I was here,' he said. 'Let's get

this over with, Thomas.'

'What?! Don't I get a say in this?' blurted Thomas.

'Come on lad. While Captain Calamity over there is ditherin' we can take the fort like heroes.'

'But …'

'I've been keepin' an eye on that lookout. If there was anyone in the fort they would have someone up there and I ain't seen anyone for a good hour now. The place is empty. I am sure of it.'

Thomas found it difficult to be so sure but together they set off out of the forest and onto the grass, in full view of the stockade. He suddenly felt very exposed and hesitated.

Ahead Roxton strode up the slope. Thomas hurried after him. 'Slow down, Lord John. Shouldn't we have a white flag or something, just in case? We are going to talk to them. Right?"

'See the gate to the left?' he replied. 'It's slightly open. This place is abandoned, I am tellin' you.'

Roxton had seen war. He had faced death and survived, but Thomas felt sick with fear. Roxton reached the gate and immediately slipped inside.

Thomas panicked and ran after him, stumbling through the gate and falling on his face.

Roxton knelt down next to him. 'Good move, lad. Keepin' nice and low. But I think you can relax… Look.'

Thomas looked up. They were in a central atrium and surrounded by low cabins and pens. Every structure looked heavy and over-engineered. Massive timbers formed both the walls and rooves. Heavy doors with crude wooden latches and bolts lay open. In one corner, a cabin had been gutted by fire and there were scorch marks

on several walls. It looks like someone had attempted to burn the place down but the huge logs had resisted destruction.

He got up and brushed himself down, embarrassed now that he had panicked.

Carefully they moved round the atrium, checking rooms and pens. The black stockade walls towered over them and the smell of death hung in the air. On the other side of the atrium Thomas found a long covered corridor, at the far end of which was a heavy door still on its latch. He looked at Roxton, who nodded encouragement.

At first the lock would not budge, but then there was a thud and the gate swung open. Beyond was a huge pen, about half an acre across. The floor was covered in thick sand and there were several large columns supporting a roof across the whole structure.

'Looks like they kept very special guests in here,' said Roxton.

'I am glad they have left,' Thomas replied. 'Look at the scratches.' Nearly every surface was covered in deep claw marks. He stepped out across the sand and noticed that it had been shaped into small piles in several places.

Roxton wandered over to what looked to be piles of charcoal in the corner.

Thomas realised what he was looking at. 'This is a nesting pen. Put a pregnant mother in here, wait for her to lay, and then take her eggs.'

'No wonder they got angry and took it out on the walls,' said Roxton wandering back with something in his hand. 'There are piles of these black feathers everywhere, maybe it was a farm for particularly angry turkeys.'

Thomas took one from Roxton and inspected it. 'Big turkeys. It doesn't look like a flight feather.'

They walked back down the corridor and on the opposite side of the atrium the door to one of the larger cabins had been forced open. The bolt lay snapped on the ground. Again they approached with caution. In the dark interior they could just make out the floor was strewn with rubbish.

Roxton stepped inside and knelt down. 'These are Accala clothes and jewellery,' he said. 'This tunic is stuck to the floor. I wonder … Oh my Christ!' Roxton stumbled back. 'It's a charnel house!'

As Roxton ran back into the atrium to take some deep breaths. Thomas checked he was alright and then took a look himself. Even now, what must have been months after the event, it was clearly a scene of unimaginable violence. The floor was covered in the remains of about forty or fifty individuals. Dried blood stained the clothing and the floor. All the objects, whether clothes shoes, spears or headdresses, were torn and smashed. But what surprised Thomas was the lack of body parts. He could only find one or two bones.

He retreated outside to find Roxton.

'They slaughtered the Accala. Those bloody butchers!' shouted Roxton. 'If I ever have a chance to get my hands on the Germans who did this…'

'I am not sure it was the Germans,' Thomas answered. 'Where are the bodies and the bullet holes?'

'Then who?'

Suddenly a movement caught his eye.

'There!' said Thomas. Hanging for a moment on the outer stockade, silhouetted against the evening sky, was the powerful shape of a large primate.

It turned and held Thomas's gaze, its glinting, yellow eyes full of malice. Of course, he thought, the ape-men that Roxton and the

other members of the original expedition had fought and decimated to defend the natives, must have survived after all.

'A red devil!' shouted Roxton, raising his rifle and firing off two shots even as Thomas tried to stop him.

He looked back to the wall but the creature had gone.

'What d'you do that for?' spat Roxton. 'There is your answer. It was those savages. Those loathsome sub human brutes must have got their revenge.'

Thomas paused and composed himself. 'There is a mystery here, Lord John. If we are to discover it, shooting the pithecanthropus is not going to help.'

At that moment, Gregory and his men tumbled through the gate, guns raised, expecting trouble.

Thomas raced forward. 'Captain! Stand your men down. The compound is empty.'

'What about the second shot?' said Gregory.

Roxton controlled his temper. 'My fault. Thought I saw somethin', but I was wrong.'

Gregory huffed and then gathered his men in the centre of the atrium. 'It will be night soon. We must make this place secure and set sentries there, there and there,' he ordered, pointing at the three corners of the stockade away from the cliff. 'Bingham climb up to those caves and keep watch up there. Two hour shifts. Now bloody move!'

He approached Roxton. 'Are you sure this place is empty?'

'Sadly, yes,' Roxton replied. 'We will have to wait until the morning to search every part of it properly.'

'I agree, and then we leave via the caves.'

‘What?’ said Thomas. ‘We are not leaving here until we have discovered exactly what has been going on.’

‘It’s over, the Germans have gone and the answer to what they did will be here in this stockade,’ said Gregory. ‘If not, it won’t be found out in the bleeding jungle, will it? We have no provisions and no hope of transport, even if we reach the river. My duty is to get my remaining men out of here alive.’

‘Captain, men have already died trying to get us here and, unless we find out exactly what the Germans did here, many more might die at the Front. Those were your orders. And that is our duty!’

‘Don’t tell me my duty, you little shit. What you really want us to do is sit around here protecting you until you find out what happened to your mad father. Don’t you?’

Roxton stepped between them. ‘Let’s wait until the mornin’, shall we? I am sure things will become clearer then.’

Gregory shook his head and walked away.

‘Lad, listen to me,’ said Roxton. ‘You do realise your old Pa died a long time ago in the jungle somewhere. He would never have got back here by himself .’

‘I am not expecting to find him but I do expect to find some answers. It is not just about my father. Nothing adds up here. For instance why would the ape men kill the Accala?’

‘Those devils don’t need reasons. They are the things that have been followin’ us since we arrived. I don’t mind sayin’, I am with Gregory. The sooner we can get out of this vile place the better. Whatever else the Hun did here, they have poisoned Challenger’s paradise.’

As darkness fell the sentries settled in their posts and the rest tried to make themselves comfortable on the atrium floor. But Thomas could not sleep. Every time he closed his eyes he saw the face of the

pithecanthropus. The moon rose over the stockade walls, bathing the atrium in its cold light, and Thomas decided it would be better if he relieved a sentry.

High on the stockade he could look out over the entire plateau. Lake Gladys glistened in the distance and the sound of bizarre nocturnal animals drifted up the hill from the dense jungle. Suddenly there was a movement amongst the shadows at the edge of the forest. Thomas held his breath as two ape-men stepped out into the moonlight and looked up at him.

Thomas called to the other sentry but, by the time he joined him, the figures had gone. Together the two men watched the forest's edge for half an hour, until the sentry insisted he had to return to his original post. Thomas kept watching the same spot, willing the ape-men to reappear. Gradually exhaustion overcame him and he leant on the stockade wall to rest.

He was woken with a start as he felt the next sentry climb the ladder to relieve him. He stretched and rubbed his face to wake up. Then looked back at the moonlit forest's edge.

'Sorry I think I dropped off,' said Thomas apologetically.

The relief sentry did not answer but Thomas felt him step up behind him. At that moment he understood something was very wrong. His nose was assaulted by a rancid smell and, in the corner of his eye, he caught a long hairy arm move towards the stockade cutting off his escape.

Before he could cry out or draw his pistol, the brute brought its fist crashing down on his head and he blacked out.

When Thomas came round he found himself bouncing up and down on the red, hairy back of an ape-man. His arms and legs were bound and his head was throbbing with pain. He drifted in and out of consciousness as he was carried at speed through the jungle. He tried struggling but the huge arm that held him in place just

tightened, almost squeezing the breath out of him. This continued for what seemed like hours. The only comfort Thomas had was the satisfaction of being sick down the back of his captor.

Eventually they passed through a low tunnel of thorn bushes, which hid a clearing beyond.

He was thrown roughly to the ground where he lay still, waiting for the ape-man to make the next move, which was a sharp kick in his side. He rolled over and saw he was now surrounded by the creatures. He estimated four large males and ~~a~~ perhaps forty smaller females and juveniles. It was extraordinarily unnerving looking into their eyes. They were apes. They were animals, but their eyes looked human. They didn't just react to him – they watched and considered him. It was if they were waiting for him to do something. For a moment he wondered if he should try talking to them. Then one large male grunted and defecated in front of him.

Thomas slowly looked about considering his options. In one corner of the clearing there was a pile of dried and half-chewed bones. With a shudder, he remembered reports from the first expedition that these ape men had a taste for human flesh.

He had to escape. Despite the bindings on his legs he scrabbled up and tried to lunge back towards the thicket opening. An explosion of pain on the back of his head threw him to the ground, and once again blackness swallowed him.

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The sun was at its highest when he came round for the second time. It felt like he was lying under a furnace. His lips were cracked and his mouth dry. He reached painfully for the back of his head. It was caked in blood and dust. He was not capable of sitting up, so he just shifted his head to the side and squinted at his surroundings. Someone had stacked layers of thorn bush branches around him so that he was completely hemmed in. This, he guessed, was an ape-man prison. His legs and hands, however, were no longer bound.

Through the tangled walls he could see he was still in the clearing and, in the distance, was the troop sitting in the shade.

Trying not to attract any attention, he slowly slid over to the side of the enclosure shaded by a tall cyathea fern. There were several smelly tubers lying there, which he pushed aside while checking the ape-men to make sure they were not looking.

These red-haired homonids were the pithecanthropus the first expedition had encountered and slaughtered by the dozen when they became a threat. He was always surprised his father had not shown more interest in these creatures, as when he was young Thomas himself had been fascinated by them. He had even imagined himself lecturing to a captivated audience at the Zoological Institute; rubbishing Piltdown Man and revealing how his studies on the plateau had unlocked the origins of man. As it turned out now, he was face down in the mud, half concussed and hiding from the ape-men.

Through the thorns, he saw several youngsters sat round an adult female under an enormous gingko tree. Thomas shifted himself, curious to see what they were doing. The group was surrounded by several of the little pheasant-like dinosaurs he had met earlier. They all seemed to be watching the female expectantly. She had a large stone and was smashing something then feeding bits to the juveniles. Soon he realised she was breaking open large bones and feeding the youngsters the marrow.

Thomas felt sick again. Thoughts of cannibalism came back to haunt him. He shut his eyes and curled into a ball.

He was woken late afternoon by movement just outside the wall of thorns. A young pithecanthropus was watching him.

He kept very still. Then he noticed the creature was eating a tuber like the ones strewn round him. Inside it was filled with liquid and thick, soft yellow flesh. Thomas was dying of thirst and the sight of the fruit was too much. He reached out and grabbed a tuber, ripping

it open and devouring the soft insides. It was the most delicious thing he had ever tasted. He was on his third before he looked up and noticed the youngster had gone. He half expected an adult to come and drag him out.

But nothing happened and, as evening arrived, the pithecanthropus divided up into small groups and started grooming.

Gradually Thomas's head cleared and his curiosity took over. So far they showed no sign of wanting to eat him. Through the thorns he began to observe their behaviour. The more he concentrated on making mental notes, the more he found he could distance himself from the danger he was in. From the tubers he could see they were at least omnivores and a closer look at the pile of bones under the gingko revealed they were from large quadrupeds.

They were very odd looking primates; a bit like orangutans but with longer legs. They had noticeably larger craniums than other apes, but still the sloping forehead and prominent jaw line. Their walk was the strangest aspect, upright but slightly stiff at the knees. It appeared to be a male dominated group, but there did not seem to be a single alpha. There was some sort of a crèche system where one mother would look after several juveniles, while others were grooming the males or collecting food. Confrontations were rare, but when they took place there was very little physical contact, just a lot of noise and show.

As night arrived they started making beds out of dried fern leaves. All the beds were close together in the centre of the clearing but, just as they were settling down, one adult picked up a bundle of leaves and came towards Thomas, throwing them over the thorn wall.

Thomas was astonished; why help your food sleep? Then he remembered from his father's diary, the pithecanthropus initially accepted the old professor as one of their own. He felt his face and the thick stubble that had developed since leaving Britain. Maybe they didn't think of him as a meal after all.

A moment later he saw another animal carrying a bed down to the other end of the clearing and, for the first time, he noticed there was some kind of structure among the tree ferns. The light was too bad to see much, but it suddenly occurred to Thomas there could be another human being held by the ape-men, maybe a German. He decided in the morning he had to do something about his predicament.

Night passed and just before dawn the plateau awoke. Throughout the dense forest a chorus of calls announced the day. The variety was bewildering, high-pitched whistles, coughing barks, screeches and, occasionally, the chilling bellows of huge beasts. Thomas lay still, taking in the wonderful strangeness of the place as he watched the sky brighten above him. When the warm morning light hit the top of the tallest trees, the pithecanthropus started to move about and Thomas decided it was time.

He stood up and started to shout. At first he just made a series of loud incoherent noises but soon he fell into song. Music wasn't one of Thomas's passions so he had to dredge up a tune from his childhood.

Not surprisingly, the sight of their prisoner stomping up and down in his enclosure singing, 'It's a Long Way to Tipperary' at the top of his voice caused the group to become agitated. The youngsters backed off while the larger males strutted forward, screeching at him and striking the outside of the thorn wall.

Thomas ignored the commotion and continued with the two verses of the only song he knew. 'Goodbye Piccadilly, Farewell Leicester Square!'

Eventually one of the ape-men pulled at a large thorn branch and opened a gap in the wall. Thomas screwed up his courage and darted through.

This caught the nearest male by surprise and he scampered backwards.

‘To the sweetest girl I know!’ Thomas picked up a branch and started striking the ground just as he had seen the larger males do the day before.

The male recovered and ran at him with lightning speed, lips pulled back to reveal his long fangs.

‘It’s a long, long way to Tipperary, but my heart’s right there!’ By now he was just shouting the words. The male came so close he could smell his last meal, but Thomas held his ground.

The ape-man turned and ran round the rest of the group, who were by now all screaming and beating the ground.

Before he could run at him again, Thomas set off after the male, bundling other ape-men out the way. It was chaos, just what Thomas wanted. For the next five minutes the male tried again and again to intimidate him, but Thomas trusted it was all show and held his ground.

Finally his adversary bolted out of the clearing and into the jungle.

Thomas stopped singing and stood still.

Gradually the rest of the group calmed down and started an intense session of grooming.

His plan was working better than he could have possibly have hoped. He strutted back across the clearing, doing his best to look like a dominant pithecanthropus. Just like his father, they were accepting him into the troop.

Once he was sure there was no new challenge, his attention turned to the other enclosure. He was nearer now and he could clearly see it looked more like a simple hut. Thomas was mystified. As he approached he saw the walls and roof were carefully constructed out of cut branches. Outside lay the pile of bedding from the night before, untouched. He called out, but there was no answer. He looked back and realised the whole group was watching him.

Close up, he noticed the structure was in a state of disrepair. The door lay at an angle and a lot of rotting bedding was piled up behind it. He pulled at the door and it fell open. The troop began to chatter and click behind him. They seemed frightened to go any closer. It suddenly occurred to Thomas that an alpha male – some huge, super-intelligent ape-man might be in there. But there was no movement from the inside.

He stepped forward into the darkness, and as his eyes adjusted he saw a figure seated at the back of the hut next to a rough-hewn table. It was a man wearing a pith helmet and dressed in rags.

Thomas called again but, stepping closer, he realised why there was no response. The man was long dead. His flesh had dried on the bone and he sat in the same position he had died in, with his arms relaxed on the sides of the chair and facing the door. An exercise book and bottle still lay on his lap and a long dark beard covered his chest.

Thomas sank to the ground. No wonder the pithecanthropus had followed him since his arrival, kidnapped him and accepted him into their group so easily.

‘Oh, father!’ said Thomas.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

‘Hold still, Lieutenant! Let me look at it.’

‘It’s your damn fault I got hit in the first place. Owww!’

Milly Summerlee firmly ripped the shirt off Lieutenant David Jones shoulder. ‘I am a nurse. You are the soldier. You do your job, I will do mine,’ she said.

‘We shouldn’t have gone in there in the first place. We were lucky to get out alive and for what? A metal box.’

‘The bullet has gone clean through. I am not sure it has even broken a bone. You’re lucky.’

‘Oh yeah? I didn’t notice anyone else get hit mind.’

Captain Malone returned to the small outhouse they were hiding in, just on the outskirts of Amiens. After fleeing the sidings they had managed to follow the tracks east for a mile before heading north and crossing the Somme at a small bridge near Camon. After running for half an hour they needed to stop to see to Jones’s wound.

‘How’s the patient, nurse?’ he said.

‘Fine, except for a large chip on his shoulder,’ she said as she gently moved his arm across his chest. ‘Have you got a knife, Captain?’

Malone offered her a small penknife and she proceeded to cut a large square out of her serge dress.

‘How soon can we move?’ asked Malone.

‘As soon as I have immobilized this shoulder.’ She carefully wrapped the Lieutenant’s arm in the square of serge cloth and tied it tight behind his neck.

‘Ow, again,’ said Jones. ‘You did that deliberately.’

‘Indeed I did,’ said Milly. ‘I don’t want it flapping around and neither do you, or they will be able to hunt us down by listening to your whining. Now, look, I have your blood on my hands.’

Malone checked the road outside ‘All right, Ms Summerlee, are we done? We need to keep moving. I am worried that we haven’t seen patrols out looking for us on the road.’

Milly helped Jones up and they all slipped outside. It was dark, but the sky was clear and a half moon provided enough light in-between scudding clouds. Even though they were only a few hundred yards from the rail and a main road into Amiens they had managed to find cover amongst the bushes on the banks of the Somme.

Malone left a sentry by the bridge and then gathered the others round and held out the controller. ‘Right, our priority is to get this box back to the Allies as soon as possible. There is a British airfield just east of here that the Germans overran before our boys could fly all the planes out. My plan is to steal one of those and fly the box west.’

‘Sir, with respect,’ said Jones. ‘The Front is broken and in chaos, shouldn’t we just try and slip back on foot?’

‘I don’t think we have time. Look how fast they took Amiens and they are not going to stop there. I think they are going to try and encircle our lads. The creatures and this box are key to their successes. We have to get this into the hands of our boffins as soon as possible.’

‘I am sorry, Sir, but I think they just got lucky with Villers-Bretonneux. I can’t believe the Kaiser is banking on a bunch of animals to win the war for him.’

‘Shh!’ Malone held up his hand.

Milly looked up and saw their sentry racing across the bridge towards them. In the half-light she could just make out something large and low was following him. Just as he reached the edge of the

road the shape darted forward, bringing him crashing to the ground. He rolled over and tried to kick out, but he was enveloped. His scream was cut short.

Malone began to run up the embankment when he was grabbed by Jones who pointed across the river.

Standing on the opposite bank, watching them, was the sleek, muscular shape of a gorgonopsid. It sniffed the air and let out a deep throaty hiss. Next moment it slipped into the water and headed straight for them.

Jones pulled out his pistol, but Malone stopped him. 'We are surrounded by Germans. If you shoot they will be all over us. We need to get out of here. Now.'

Dragging his lieutenant with him Malone scrabbled up the bank. Milly followed without looking back.

Quickly the trees gave way to fields and the group had no choice but to run across the open ground. It was at least half a mile to the nearest cover and they all ran as fast as they could, some faster than others.

Milly quickly tired. She was not used to sprinting. The field just seemed to go on forever. As her legs slowed and her lungs began to burn she was sure she could hear the predator gaining on her. Her arms began to flail and then she tripped. But, instead of a creature landing on her, Malone was beside her, dragging her to her feet, his strange face close to hers.

'It's alright. They are not fast. Look.'

She turned and saw that the two gorgonopsids were just setting off across the field. Their strange waggling run was efficient, but not as fast as a human running.

'Pace yourself,' said Malone. 'Come on!'

With his help she made it across the field where they regrouped.

‘What are those things?’ said Jones.

Milly gathered her breath. ‘Some kind of reptilian bloodhound. Not fast, but they are not going to give up. They must have the scent of someone’s blood.’

There was a pause and it dawned on Milly what she had said.

‘Right. Captain, with your permission, I suggest we split.’ said Jones. ‘It has to be my blood they are following. I will head off north and you will be clear to get to the airfield.’

‘No, I am sorry,’ said Milly. ‘We need to stick together.’

Jones hesitated, but Malone cut in. ‘You have a pistol, make sure you kill one if it gets close,’ said Malone. Then he turned to his other two men. ‘Benjamin and McLaren go with him. Milly, come with me. We have a plane to catch.’

‘What, no, wait. Captain Malone you can’t …’

But Malone ignored her and disappeared into the copse.

She looked at Jones. He smiled weakly and, for the first time, she saw a vulnerable young man behind the bluff character.

‘Don’t worry, Miss Milly. It’s not your fault. Good luck.’ Then he turned to the others. ‘Come on lads. Let’s exercise these dogs.’

‘Sorry,’ she said, but he was already heading north.

Milly scrambled into the undergrowth after Malone. For about an hour he set a heart-pumping pace. They ran, scampered, hid and ducked across fields, woods and hedgerows until, finally, when she thought she could run no further, he pointed to a large open field of grass with a couple of low barns and a farmhouse in the middle.

They waited until the moon went behind a cloud and then, crouching low, ran up to the farmhouse. A yellow glow spilled from one window, the rest were dark.

Malone handed her the controller and then peered inside before he ducked down again.

'Three,' he whispered. 'I am going to check the barns. Stay here.' He crept round the side of the house and out of sight.

Milly waited. She could hear the murmur of men's conversation inside, but otherwise it was quiet.

Eventually she moved to the side of the house and looked across at the barns. A single-seater Sopwith Pup was sitting in the moonlight, but there was no sign of any activity around it. She began to worry Malone might have been captured so decided to risk a peek through the window.

The three men were playing cards at a table in a homely looking kitchen. As she was looking there was a knock at the door. This was clearly not something the men were expecting. After some discussion one got up and opened the door cautiously. There was a loud crack of a pistol and the man's head was flicked backwards, spraying blood on the man behind. Before the others could reach for their weapons, Malone stepped into the room and calmly shot both the other men, first with a single shot to the body, and then the second each to the head.

Milly just stared in shock as, methodically, he checked the bodies and then left the room, pulling the door shut behind him.

She just stayed standing there, unable to move, until she heard his voice next to her. 'It had to be done. Us or them.'

'But, this is not you.'

His expression chilled her. 'Forgive me, but what can you know of who I am? I discovered I was good at this long ago, before the war, with the ape-men on the plateau. The 'red mist' I call it and it has served me well.'

Dumbly she handed him the controller. She didn't know what to say. This man didn't look or behave like the Edward Malone her father had described, or who had been so considerate to her these last few days. Her mind swirled with the contradictions in what she had just seen and the speed and callousness with which he had sent Lieutenant Jones to almost certain death. Reason told her this man was a ruthless hero - he had to be to have survived what he had – but, deep down, he now scared her. It was true he was good at killing, but she was worried he enjoyed it.

'We need to get the Pup started. You are going to have to strap yourself to the wing I am afraid.' He ran off back towards the barns and Milly took one final look at the carnage in the kitchen.

'Milly! I need you to help!' came the Captain's voice from behind the house.

She stumbled round and saw Malone by the small biplane. He had a large syringe and was priming the cylinders.

'Quick! It's getting light and more crew will be here soon.'

She looked up. The stars were gone and the sky was turning a light blue.

Malone clambered into the Pup's seat with the controller.

'Do you know what to do?'

Milly shook her head.

'You need to get the propeller going. Just pull down hard when I say. Then stand well back while I get the engine up to speed.'

She hurried round to the front and grasped the propeller.

'Throttle open. Fuel control off. Right. Pull Milly!'

She yanked the propeller down as hard as she could and staggered away.

The engine spluttered, spun and then roared. Smoke blew out of the exhaust and the propeller started to turn.

Milly stood clear and waited for Malone's signal.

He looked up and gave her the thumbs up, but then he started to gesticulate wildly at her.

She was confused.

He pulled out his pistol and leveled it at her. Milly felt the breath catch in her throat – did he lead her here just to kill her?

He pulled the trigger and Milly jolted in anticipation, but the gun was clearly out of bullets.

Now he was shouting and he threw the gun at her.

At last she turned round.

There, no more than twenty feet away, was a gorgonopsid, its muscled black figure low in the grass, ready to pounce.

Terrified she took off on her heels and ran straight for the farmhouse. Every stride she expected to feel a set of teeth close round her legs. As she approached the house she could hear the thump of the creature in the grass behind her and its hiss getting louder.

She hit the door at speed and, had Malone left the latch down, she would have been dead. Instead it swung open and then bounced back. Frantically her hands followed it back and pulled down the latch, just as the predator smashed into it. There was a twist of metal and wrenching of wood but the door held. As the creature gathered itself for another assault she pushed the bolts home at the top and bottom of the door.

The creature tried again but the door was strong and Milly relaxed a little.

She went to the window and saw the Sopwith turning at the bottom of the field. She couldn't see his face, but she knew what Malone was thinking. The biplane gathered speed and took off low over the house. He was right, of course, she was no longer a priority.

She backed into the kitchen. The three German airmen lay dead on the stone floor in pools of their own blood. Then she looked at her own hands and remembered. She had got Jones' blood on her when she was strapping his shoulder. The creatures had been hunting her too.

Just as this registered the window next to her exploded and the gorgonopsid tumbled into the kitchen. It hit the table and rolled over on to its front.

For a moment they faced each other across ten foot of kitchen.

Its mouth hung open, showing two long sabre teeth. Its eyes were tiny and set low on the side of its head, but its nostrils flared and whiskers quivered as it focused on its prey.

Backed against the wall, Milly felt a door behind her and quickly slipped through, latching it. But her luck was running out. She was in a pantry and this door was weak. There was no window. She was trapped.

Suddenly the door shook in front of her and the creature's head came straight through snapping and hissing as it strained to reach her. As she watched, its bulky neck muscles started to turn and twist, grinding the wood either side.

Milly flattened herself against the back shelves as the beast's head ground closer and closer. Bottles of oil, bags of flour and pickle jars smashed around her as it thrashed.

Then it hit her – small eyes, large nostrils. She was in the perfect place. She scanned the shelves and there was her salvation: a huge pot of pepper and even some paprika. She seized them both and

smashed them down on the large black nostrils that flared in front of her.

The effect was instant. As every mucus membrane inside the gorgonopsid's giant, super-sensitive nostrils became coated in burning pepper, it tore its head out of the pantry and thrashed around the kitchen. The table smashed and bodies were thrown aside as it pawed at its face trying to stop the excruciating pain.

Milly stepped out through the broken door and kept close to the wall.

The beast's eyes, nose and mouth were now covered in an orange froth that was being flung around the room as its actions became frenzied.

There was a dead German airman at Milly's feet. She knelt down and unholstered a pistol. Carefully she took aim at the creature and fired. It jolted but it did not stop wiping its snout on the floor. She fired again and this time it collapsed. As it lay coughing and whimpering, she stood over it. Its tiny black eyes bulged in pain.

'This is so wrong. I am sorry,' she murmured and she fired at point blank range into his skull.

At last it lay still.

'Legte de Waffe! Hande hoch! Hande schnell!'

Milly dropped the pistol. She turned slowly, raising her hands.

Two storm troopers were at the window with rifles pointing at her. Then, behind her, a young officer came in from the corridor. He looked around at the froth on the wall, the dead beast and three bodies lying on the floor and the tall, elegant woman in a tatty serge nurse's uniform standing in the middle of the carnage.

'Mein Gott, was hier passiert ist?' he said.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Lord Roxton and Corporal Freya Roberts heaved the massive stockade door into place and sunk to the ground exhausted. They had been out exploring the plateau since dawn and had failed to find any trace of Thomas Challenger.

'My friends were right,' said Roxton. 'I am gettin' too old for all this.'

'Shall I look at your back?' said Roberts.

Roxton started to ease off his rucksack. 'I think the pack took the hit. I must have lost all my rations.'

Roberts knelt next to him and inspected it. It was ripped wide open.

'Your water bottle is fine and the three 'o three rounds are still in the side pocket. But that's it.'

'Shame, I was lookin' forward to that corned beef.'

Roberts pulled up Roxton's shirt and checked his back. 'Not a mark, that's amazing.'

'I must remember to write and thank Mr Pink at Messrs Burberry for the quality of their rucksacks. Perhaps you could massage a little lower down, my dear,' he said with a wolfish grin.

Roberts dropped the shirt and slapped him on the back. 'You're fine. As fit as any man your age who drinks too much, smokes cocaine and has a lump of metal in his leg. Now, we need to reset the fire and get into the watchtower before dark.'

Roxton got up painfully. There may not have been a mark, but he was sure he had popped a rib. What was more, his leg was aching more than he wanted to admit .

As Roberts built up the smouldering bonfire in the middle of the atrium, Roxton carried their supplies up to the watchtower. The only

way up was via a ladder and through a hatch in the floor. It was the safest place to stay the night. The sun was beginning to set and there were no clouds. If Thomas were still alive out there he'd be able to see the column of smoke from Roberts' fire.

It had been two days now since the ape-men snatched Thomas. There had been a lot of recriminations. Gregory had refused to let anyone mount a rescue mission that night. The next morning, he announced that Thomas was not mission critical, and ordered his men to concentrate their search on the stockade for evidence of German activity.

Roxton had refused to obey his orders and had set off into the jungle by himself.

He knew the dangers of the plateau well and how fool hardy it was to head out alone. But he also felt guilty he had not warned Thomas about the ape-men and, if they had harmed him, Roxton was determined to make them pay. By midday he made it to 'ape town', where they had encountered the colony last time, but it was long since abandoned. The ape-men must have set up a new colony elsewhere. He continued his search but, as the day wore on, he found nothing. Eventually he had to turn back to avoid being caught out after nightfall.

When he arrived at the stockade, Gregory and his men were gone. Roberts had volunteered to stay behind with a few rations and one of the machine pistols. She described how they had searched the whole site and found nothing other than the Accala remains. They had established that the Germans must have spent years removing animals and eggs off the plateau through the caves and via a huge lift, the remnants of which still lay at the base of the cliff nearby. Then Gregory had promptly declared that the mission was complete and his duty was to get his men off the plateau and out of the jungle.

'That will burn all night, no problem,' said Roberts as she joined Roxton in the watchtower.

Both stared out across the thick green canopy that stretched before them. In the distance, dozens of pterosaurs circled on the evening thermals and the orange sunset gave the whole plateau a warm, burnished look.

She sighed. 'Professor Challenger was right. This is wondrous indeed. Even those phorusrachus that attacked us – what magnificent predators!'

Roxton was rolling himself a cigarette. 'Corporal, how well do you know Captain Gregory?'

She continued to stare across the twilight forest. 'I was assigned to this unit about three months ago,' she said casually.

'That isn't answerin' my question, is it?' A silence followed which suggested Roberts was not to be drawn.

'You see I have been strugglin' to work out why a man like Gregory volunteered to lead this mission,' Roxton continued. 'And then I noticed how he behaved towards you. The Captain is a man who is willin' to bully and intimidate anyone under his charge. But not you. He has never once issued you a direct order.'

Roberts sighed. 'Gregory has his orders, I have mine. Is there any point to these inquiries?'

'Just passin' the time.' He paused for a moment, then started up again. 'At first I guessed you actually came from a different department of Section 6, but that didn't explain why he was here. Then the mornin' I left I heard him talkin' to you in Hindi.'

Roberts continued to take no notice of him and started to prepare her bed.

'Bengal lancer recruits pretty girl from the Chittagong Hills? He's your lover, isn't he? Does Creed know?'

Still Roberts remained silent.

‘How has he enjoyed your crude flirtation with Thomas?’

‘Enough!’ said Roberts. ‘You know nothing. I am here to help you find Challenger, or would you prefer it if I had left with the rest?’

Roxton grinned. ‘Calm down, girlie. I am sure if Thomas needs a back rub ..’

Roberts’ right arm shot out, shoving her palm hard and deep into Roxton’s solar plexus.

He grunted and dropped to his knees.

‘I said “Enough” … and don’t call me “girlie”.’

Roxton groaned and rolled on to his back. ‘Caught me off guard!’ he gasped.

‘I will take first watch,’ she replied, turning away.

Roxton decided against further interrogation and that the best next step was to stay exactly where he was and try and get some sleep once the waves of pain subsided.

The sun fell below the horizon and the sky flared red while the plateau slipped into darkness. Roxton was woken by Roberts about four hours later, but it wasn’t just to take over watch. She beckoned him over to the watchtower parapet. There were ape-men scampering up the grassy slope towards the stockade.

Both ducked down.

‘I counted at least a dozen of all different sizes,’ she whispered.

‘Great. They obviously liked the taste and have come back for seconds. I’ll use the rifle to pick off one or two of them. If they rush the watchtower, use the machine pistol. But not before.’

Roxton checked his gun and then, slowly, looked up over the side. In the low light it was hard to pick things out and the flickering fire gave the impression there was movement all over the compound.

‘Damn, I think they are already in,’ he muttered. He took aim at a shadow. The crack of his rifle caused a flurry of clicks and whistles but no clear silhouette to shoot at.

‘I can’t see any of them.’ Then he felt the tiniest vibration beneath his feet. ‘They’re climbin’ up the tower!’

He stepped away from the wall and they stood back to back, guns ready, waiting for the onslaught.

There came a gentle knocking on the trap door beneath their feet. They looked at each other, confused, and then back down at the hatch.

Slowly it began to lift up.

Roxton pointed his rifle at the gap and squeezed the trigger.

‘Behind you!’ shouted Roberts. She was looking over Roxton’s shoulder.

He turned to see a huge primate had climbed up onto the parapet. As he swung round to shoot, the beast grabbed his rifle and ripped it out of his hand, smashing it against the wall. Roxton pulled a knife out of his belt.

At the same time the hatch flew open.

Roberts lifted the MP 18.

‘Pull that trigger and we will all be dead,’ said a voice from below.

Roberts hesitated and up popped Thomas Challenger’s head. ‘Lord John, please put that knife down. You won’t hurt him but he could take you apart, limb by limb.’

‘Thomas! You’re alive. What the hell happened? And what are you doin’ with these devils?’ Roberts lowered the machine gun, but Roxton was not about to drop his guard.

Thomas clambered up into the watchtower and walked right up to the giant ape-man with the remains of Roxton's rifle in his hands. He did not look him in the face but gestured to the atrium and made some curious clicks with his mouth.

The beast visibly relaxed and then, without a sound, dropped out of sight.

'Where is Gregory?' said Thomas.

'Gone,' said Roxton. 'But never mind that. Tell me what the bloody hell is goin' on?'

'You are still pointing a knife at me, Lord John.'

'Unbelievably, you are even more irritatin' than your father … But I cannot tell you how glad I am you are still alive.' He put his knife away and gave Thomas a hard slap on the shoulder. 'Did those red bastards hurt you?'

'You know you have got the pithecanthropus all wrong, Lord John. They had nothing to do with the slaughter here.'

'They told you this, did they?'

'No, my father did.'

Roxton was beside himself. 'What! Is he here too? That old rascal survived? Unbelievable! Where is he?'

'No. Sorry Lord John. I should have been clearer. My father told me in his diary.' Thomas held up a small beaten-up book. 'Somehow, he did make it back here. He sought out the remaining pithecanthropus troop and they adopted him as their leader. This notebook contains at least two years of observations before he died of what sounds like a perforated ulcer, poor old fellow.'

Roxton and Roberts were struggling to keep up. 'So where is he now?' said Roberts.

‘Where he died… On his throne in their camp. That is where I found him. Sitting there in his pith helmet on with this diary and a bottle of stinky liquid on his lap. I think they grabbed me because they recognised the family resemblance.’

‘Well, I be damned. I wonder how he avoided the Germans.’

‘I don’t think he did. I knew there was a missing piece to the puzzle and this begins to explain it.’

From down below came a flurry of whistles. Thomas hurried to the watchtower wall.

‘Those were warning calls,’ he said. ‘It is only a flock of phorusrhacos. Where did you say Gregory went?’

‘I am sorry,’ said Roberts, ‘but, while Lord Roxton was out hunting for you, the Captain decided his mission was complete and left with the other men.’

‘Charming. I always knew we had a special bond. I am willing to wager they never make it to the river. He hasn’t a clue what he is up against,’ said Thomas. Then he took her hand. ‘But thank you for staying, it means a lot to me.’

Roberts put on a broad smile and then caught Roxton glaring at her over Thomas’ shoulder.

‘I bet you haven’t eaten anything recently,’ she said breaking the moment.

‘If you want to know my furry friends were quite hospitable. In fact let’s go down to the fire and talk. Looks like they have caught a deer, and they won’t mind if we cook our share.’

It took some persuading to get Roxton down from the watchtower with so many ape-men about, but eventually the smell of roasting venison did the trick.

It was past midnight when they finally tucked into their cooked meal. Yellow sparks spiralled up into the starry night as Thomas produced his father's journal. It was an old blue exercise book with lined pages inside. Endearingly, the Professor had written his name and address on the front. Every page was filled with dense writing and tiny intricate sketches.

'As far as I can tell,' said Thomas, 'he had one pencil that he tried to make last. Once he had filled the book up he went back and started again, writing between the lines, which makes it quite confusing. But he did have a lot to say.'

'So what was this puzzle you keep on goin' on about?' said Roxton.

'The notes start with pages of observations about pithecanthropus behaviour and how well they are adapted to life on the plateau. They must have accepted him back into the troop and you can tell he is in a naturalist's paradise. Doesn't even sound like the angry old man I knew.'

The emotion caught in Thomas's voice. Roberts watched him closely.

'Anyway when he first reached the plateau the Germans were already here, but he is just pleased to see them. He is convinced they are simply more enlightened than the British and he actually praises their scientific methods. For their part they seem to treat him with respect and left him to his studies.'

'Does he mention anyone in particular?' asked Roberts.

'One man, a Kurt Von Heket. Seems he is some kind of wunderkind. They had several 'exchange of views'. But the good times don't last. One day it turns to hell. The troop is attacked by a new type of dinosaur that he has never seen before. It is clearly a terrifying event. My father dubbed them teryx, because they look like a cross between a giant crow and a dinosaur. These creatures take over the diary.

‘Listen, he writes; “I still cannot understand how we never encountered any of these creatures last time or why they have appeared now in such numbers. I suspect they came from the rocky outcrops of the north west. They hunt alone, in pairs and in groups. They hunt day and night, on the ground or through the trees. They tackle small and large prey but there is no doubt they have a favourite – large primates.”

Thomas paused, stoked the fire and then looked round at the troop that sat quietly in the shadows. ‘This is the dark secret of the plateau. The teryx specialise in hunting large primates. Father witnessed several killings. They were smart; *very* smart. I reckon the Germans saw this too and set about capturing and breeding them. Hundreds of breeding teryx. That was what the covered pen in the stockade was for.’

‘So what happened? Where are the Germans and who killed the Accala?”asked Roxton

‘I cannot be sure because father did not witness it, but it is clear from his observations that the numbers of teryx on the plateau began to increase dramatically.’

‘In fact I don’t think the Germans left because of orders from home. I think they were chased off when the teryx became too numerous to control. Once the stockade was abandoned I think the Accala hid there, but the teryx came after them and slaughtered them in that cabin.’

Roxton shook his head. ‘All very dramatic I am sure, but where are they now, these hordes of feathered beasties?’

‘This is the worst bit. Remember what my father’s letter said? And how Rodrigues’ found a boat full of blood? After the Germans left down the tunnels, so did the teryx. They must have followed their prey. Pandora’s box has been opened and they are already out there, roaming the Amazon and feasting on their favourite food; large, slow, ground-dwelling primates … Humans.’

Roxton spat into the fire. ‘Damn the Hun!’

‘It may not have been all the Germans’ fault my Lord. The teryx are ground nesting animals and this was their weakness. Father refers to the ape-men’s appetite for dinosaur eggs. Maybe that is what kept the teryx population in check. But, if you remember, when you were last here you shot rather a lot of them – maybe enough to help boost the teryx numbers. In other words, you and the first expedition may have started it all. There is an incredibly delicate balance on this plateau and you disturbed it. The pithecanthropus could have been the thin red line that kept the teryx at bay. More angels than devils, m’lord.’

‘Nonsense. We were fightin’ for our lives!’

For a while they all sat in silence, then Roberts stood up slowly. ‘Right, we all know what happens next. The outside world needs to know what has gone on here and we, at the moment, are the only people with that knowledge. We are Elpis at the bottom of Pandora’s box.’

Roxton grunted. ‘’sfar as I understand it, the outside world lies at the other end of a long trek through ‘teryx’ infested jungle.’

‘Do we have a choice?’ she said. ‘We ought to try and catch up with Gregory and the others?’

‘Gregory is the least of our worries,’ said Thomas. ‘It is hundreds of miles to the nearest civilisation. If we had a boat it would at least make it possible.’

‘Ah well,’ said Roxton, ‘I knew that damn balloon would fail, that was part of the reason for visitin’ the Rodrigues, to arrange an alternative route home. I am confident Flavia will have already sent a ship up stream for us.’

‘Then I suggest we get a good night’s sleep,’ said Roberts, ‘it might be the last for a long time.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Thomas adjusted his knapsack and shouldered his rifle. Through the gates he could see the pithecanthropus troop grooming and sunning themselves in the morning sunshine. Under the watchful eye of their mother, two babies were rolling down the grassy slope.

Roxton finished laying some flowers by the entrance to the cabin where all the Accala died. 'The Accala were a good people,' he said as he joined Thomas. 'They did not deserve an end like that. Why didn't they go with the damned Germans?'

'This is their home. They probably expected everything to return to normal once the visitors left.'

Roberts joined them as they watched a mother groom her baby.

'I should like to come back and study those primates one day,' said Thomas.

'When we've won this war there will be nothing stopping you.'

'Rather you than me. Sorry Thomas they still creep me out,' said Roxton. 'Anyway if, as you say, those teryx have left the plateau, this will be the safest place for "large, ground dwelling primates".'

He looked up at the caves above them and handed Thomas a makeshift torch made of bituminous wood. 'Now, we had better get going. Last time we entered those caves we had a map. Let's hope we don't get lost.'

Thomas took one last look at the pithacanthropus. There was a whole lifetime of scientific study here and, if he survived, he would make sure the plateau was protected and studied. Most of all, he would make sure it was never again lost to the world. He slowly turned and followed the others up the stone steps into the darkness of the caves.

After a couple of hundred feet it became clear they did not need a map. The tunnels that led out were worn and scraped by countless journeys over the past few years. There were even torch holders fixed to the walls. The tunnels split and split again until eventually they arrived at the exit. Here the Germans had dynamited a large cavern and a stone built ramp led down to the jungle floor. All three stood looking at the mud track that led away into the Amazon.

Roberts spoke first. 'So, my Lord, any advice from one who knows?'

'March as fast as we can for the river and keep our eyes open,' said Roxton as he lit another cigarette.

'Is that it?'

'I also suggest we keep in the open as much as possible,' said Thomas. 'We cannot outrun them, but we should be able to spot them coming and at least have a chance of shooting them.'

Roberts drew a long breath. 'Alright then. As we have a clear track, how many days?'

Roxton smiled. 'It's at least a hundred and thirty miles to the stream and probably another 50 to the main tributary where I hope a boat's waitin'. But it'll be downhill most of the way.'

'Enough talking,' said Thomas and he reached out and tugged Roberts after him down the ramp. Roxton took a long drag and then set off after the others.

The track left by the Germans was forty to fifty feet wide and had been flattened by machinery, although months of neglect had already seen sections washed away and fast growing plants establish themselves. All that morning they followed it round the side of the plateau's enormous basalt cliffs. It wasn't until early afternoon that it cut away and headed off across the tree and fern studded plains. The country was open here and sloped gently downwards. The track was also harder under foot and they made fast progress.

As the sun started to set they stopped and constructed a crude shelter out of fallen tree fern stems. Once inside, they discussed the journey ahead in a low whisper. Roxton estimated they had travelled about twenty five miles that day and, at that pace, they would reach the shallow river in five days.

But the next morning brought heavy and consistent rain. The track became slippery and their progress slowed. After about two hours they came across a fire site and a couple of abandoned corned beef tins. Gregory had clearly walked further than them on the first day and made a large campfire. This lifted their spirits, especially Roberts. About midday the rain stopped and the track led down into a solid wall of giant bamboo. Again they could thank their enemy for clearing a wide path straight through what looked like an impenetrable barrier. Roxton was particularly pleased, remembering how exhausting it was last time he had to hack his way through the cane.

They crossed the cane breaks in under two hours and found a small valley on the other side, rich in banana and acai palms. That night they ate well under a bamboo shelter.

On the third day out from the plateau Roxton woke in some pain. For the older man the pace they were travelling at was a challenge and his leg was aching badly. Their progress began to slow again and they had to rest regularly for cigarette breaks. The track became rockier and the vegetation too was changing. Clumps of phoenix and coco palms appeared with brushwood between.

It was late afternoon and the track ran straight across a wide shallow valley when Thomas spotted something lying in the mud on the opposite slope. All three hurried ahead to discover an abandoned army tunic. Once again they were cheered at more evidence that Gregory's party had blazed their trail.

'Well, Thomas,' said Roxton, 'maybe the Professor was exaggeratin' about these teryx.'

‘Or they have chosen an easier prey to hunt.’

They approached the brow of the hill and Roberts noticed a second tunic amongst the trees to the side of the track. Thomas and Roxton continued a little further and their good humour evaporated. In front of them was evidence of a slaughter. Guns, equipment and clothing lay strewn about the path. In several places the Amazonian soil was stained a deep crimson where a soldier had not only fallen but must have been eaten as well. The two men stumbled forward, shocked by the carnage. More than a dozen kill sites were visible. Thomas bent down and picked up an abandoned machine pistol magazine; all that remained of Gregory and his men.

‘Oh, dear God,’ said Roberts as she joined them. Roxton tried to hold her, but she shook him off.

Thomas started to search the site methodically. There were several torn and blooded blankets lying amongst the surrounding vegetation and a large pile of ash where the party had made a fire.

Then he found what he was looking for: a large black feather.

‘If we were really in any doubt, this confirms it,’ he said. ‘This is like the feathers we found in the stockade’s nesting area. I am guessing this was a night attack. They were probably asleep. One guard wouldn’t have even seen them coming. Hardly had time to raise their weapons. Must have been at least a dozen teryx and, as far I can see, they didn’t manage to kill a single one.’ He stopped and shook his head.

‘This shouldn’t have happened.’ There was anger in Roxton’s voice. ‘Gregory said his concern was for his men, but he led them to their death.’

‘Just be quiet for once,’ shouted Roberts. ‘You know nothing!’

‘Carefully, you won’t catch me off guard this time!’

Roberts rocked back on her heels and prepared to fight.

Thomas found himself having to step between them. ‘What is the matter with you two? We won’t survive if we argue amongst ...’

Suddenly the sound of something large approaching through the undergrowth stopped the argument. All three levelled their weapons as the plants parted and a confused tapir stumbled into the open. For a moment his sensitive nose worked the air, then he turned and bolted off down the hill.

Thomas breathed out. ‘Right, if you two have finished. Sadly there’s no one and nothing to bury, so I suggest we keep moving.’

Roberts turned away and knelt down next to one of the largest bloody stains. She dropped her head and started singing a quiet Hindi lullaby.

Thomas looked at Roxton, confused.

He shook his head. ‘Give her a moment. These were her comrades… and pretty much the toughest soldiers the army could find. What chance are we going to have? ’

‘We will just have to do better,’ said Thomas. ‘They were good soldiers, but we know the jungle and we know what we are up against. I am guessing the teryx round here are pretty full at the moment, so we should move on before they get hungry again.’

Roxton half smiled. ‘Do you practice those rousing speeches, young fella’?’

‘You take the Lee Enfield. I have the revolvers and Roberts can take the MP 18… when she has finished singing.’

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That night they found an ancient palm clump and camped between its roots. It was a terrible night, full of noises and movements that constantly woke them. By the morning, instead of being rested, they

were all even more exhausted. Still, after a breakfast of ripe mangoes, they pushed on.

All day they continued in silence. The track remained flat and open, but the Amazon jungle began to close in around them. Increasingly they found themselves walking in shade, which was a relief from the sun, but somehow felt more threatening.

Another night and day passed without incident. Where the ground became boggy the track had been reinforced with bundles of wood. When they failed to reach any stream, Roxton calculated they were no longer running the same route as the original expedition. To avoid the rapids on the main tributary, the Germans had probably built the landing stage down stream of Challenger's original hidden gate. They found themselves winding through the cathedral-like boughs of mature rain forest. Here and there huge teak and mahogany trees had been brought down to clear the way, but for the most part the path had to work its way round these giants.

On the evening of the sixth day out from the plateau they passed a large earthmover abandoned and upended beside the track. The huge metal hulk already had jacitara palms crawling over its wheels and colourful orchids growing round its axle. Beyond it, Thomas spotted some huts through the trees, about 200 feet away. It was getting dark on the forest floor when they wandered into a small clearing, to discover a Miranha village; several small rude buildings surrounding a large central meeting house. Roxton called out a greeting in their dialect but no one answered.

'Rodrigues was right,' said Roxton. 'There's no reason for this village to be abandoned, unless the elders declared it cursed. We should check the huts for stores and camp here tonight.'

The huts were in good condition, with walls made of crude wood planks and a roof of densely packed reeds. Thomas dived into the first, pushing aside the palm weaved door. In the dying light it was hard to see anything so he had to feel his way round. There were empty clay pots and rough cloth, but no sign of food. Then his

hands found something hard and metallic. It did not feel Miranha at all. He stumbled outside and there in his hands was the second MP 18. He called Roxton and Roberts over.

'I'm willin' to bet this is Gregory's. Idiot, yes, but also tough and stubborn as hell,' said Roxton. 'The magazine is empty, that's why he left it behind.' He turned to Roberts. 'Looks like your captain might have made it to the river after all.'

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She said nothing but grabbed the magazine off him to study it.

'We'll stay in this hut tonight and I suggest we take turns on watch,' he added.

Thomas volunteered to be first, making himself comfortable by the door.

Roxton found a place at the back of the hut, but Roberts lay down next to Thomas and, as she fell asleep, rolled over and curled round him. He watched her shape in the darkness. At that moment, London, Milly, that whole world, seemed so far away to him. He had seen so much and done so much in the last few weeks he almost felt like a different person. He reached out and rested his hand on her shoulder, then settled down to his watch.

Through the palm weave he had a good view across the centre of the village. Darkness arrived quickly and an insect-filled stillness enveloped the hut. Somewhere above, the moon provided just enough light for him to see the clearing.

Soon he felt his eyelids grow heavy. Thomas pinched the back of his hand hard. He was not going to fall asleep again not after the incident with the ape. Outside the scene seemed still enough. But as he watched the dark bulk of the communal hut seemed to grow. One of its walls seemed to slowly exude a shape which then separated away. Thomas felt his heart begin to thump as he realised he was looking at a teryx that had been creeping unseen round the base of the building.

The predator seemed to be of the night, a living manifestation of darkness. It was moving silently on two legs, every step placed carefully. Its feathery profile made it difficult to make out its shape, but its long, mobile tail was clearly bobbing about to maintain perfect balance.

This was the black creature that haunted his father's writings. To his core Thomas was a scientist and even a cynic but, in an instant, he understood the irrational terror his father described. Evolution had designed the teryx to horrify its prey. It was the perfect mixture of bird and reptile. A scaly head and legs, but a body covered in a feathery pelt. Along its arms and tail the feathers were longer and more dressed like a flying bird.

It was moving towards their hut. Thomas fought the desire to turn and run. Shaking, he slowly lifted his revolver. As it got closer he began to make out the details of its brutish head. It had heavy, fleshy black crests over both eyes and a long narrow snout with slit like nostrils at the end. Its fixed lips were slightly pulled back, exposing its teeth and giving it a permanent grin. He tried to rationalise his feelings, but only one word could describe its appearance: evil.

The way it used its clawed hands was unsettlingly like a human's and, as it advanced, it picked things up and inspected them. This cold, calculating creature was investigating the village with the intelligence of a seasoned tracker. He saw it run its claw round the shape of a footprint and sniff it.

It was close now and looking straight at their hut. He could see the eager hunger in its eyes. It took a slow step and spread out its arms in a more aggressive posture.

He had a clear shot. He could kill it but, if he missed, he might not get another chance. It was then that Thomas noticed it was focussed on his knapsack that he had left by the door. The teryx had picked up the scent of something. It vibrated its feathers and let out

a low hiss. But, instead of attacking, it leapt and turned in the air, disappearing off into the night.

Thomas slowly let out a breath he did not realise he had been holding.

The teryx did not reappear that night nor at first light. As early as they dared they came out of the hut and Thomas inspected his knapsack. It did stink, because the cap on the strange bottle he had found on his father's body was not perfect. Maybe it was some kind of deterrent. He resolved to scour the diary for a reference to it.

They sacrificed breakfast and hurried back to the track to head for the river. As the hours passed the jungle just seemed endless.

Roxton began to slow and the other two had to take it in turns to support him. By the afternoon they were beginning to face the prospect of another night in the forest when Roberts noticed the trees thinning ahead. Another 300 yards and they burst out into the open. Ahead lay a huge bowl of cleared forest, maybe a mile across, leading down to a large wooden dock and, beyond, the river. This was the construction they had seen from the airship.

Roberts shouted in delight and started to hurry down the hill.

Thomas noticed there was no sign of the boat but followed, supporting Roxton. After so long in the dark, menacing forest there was a joy just to be walking in the open again.

When they reached the dock Roberts was already jumping up and down and pointing. Downstream, anchored in the middle of the wide river, was a steamboat. Two decks tall and painted white and red, it seemed the very essence of civilisation; their ticket out of the brutal wilderness around them.

'We made it,' said Thomas.

Roxton smiled despite the agony of his leg. 'Remind me to buy somethin' very special for Flavia when we get back to Para.'

They all started waving and shouting at the boat. Movement on the deck and a belch of smoke from its black funnel indicated they had been seen.

Roxton sank to the ground to rest his leg and Thomas sat next to him, surveying the dock. It had been a huge undertaking shipping these animals off the plateau and he remained astonished that none of the mission had leaked out to the wider world. The Germans must have bought, or threatened, absolutely everyone on the river. It must have helped that his father's reputation had made the plateau a source of ridicule.

In the corner of his eye he caught movement up on the hill, at the forest's edge. As he squinted into the sun he realised it was a man hobbling down the track towards them.

'Look!' he shouted.

The man made it half way down the hill and fell. Painfully he struggled to get up. Behind him other men appeared at the top of the track.

'Who is that?' said Roberts. 'What is going on? Why aren't those men helping him? Come on, let's give him a hand.'

'No!' shouted Thomas, pulling her back. 'Those are not men behind him, those are teryx. Get your gun!'

There were now a dozen teryx strutting back and forth on the edge of the forest, watching the man limp down the hill.

Then he fell again.

'My God, it's Gregory and he's not going to make it,' muttered Thomas. Without consulting the others he started running back up the track. Watching the teryx all the time, he raced to where Gregory lay.

The Captain was in a dreadful mess, bruised and bleeding, with his uniform shredded.

Thomas bent down and got his arms under his shoulders. ‘Come on, Roxton’s watching. Don’t want him to make it and not you.’

Gregory coughed. ‘Fucking feathered bastards, surprised us.’

Thomas glanced back just as one of the teryx moved into the open. There in the sunlight a grinning death was hungry to meet them. It spread its feathered arms and started to run down the path. Suddenly it seemed gliding low to the ground, moving at lightning speed towards its prey.

‘Jesus! Move!’

Together they struggled down the hill towards the dock. They had only managed about a hundred foot when the teryx hit them, throwing them both to the ground.

It stopped just past them and turned to attack.

Thomas froze. Its dark shape, sharp claws and glinting eyes loomed over him.

A crack of a rifle arrived just after a bullet tore through the teryx’ shoulder making it twist away from them with a screech of surprise.

Thomas seized his chance and dragged Gregory to his feet, just as a second bullet passed through the creature’s neck, silencing it for good.

Ahead, Roxton was lying in a firing position and Roberts stood to one side with the MP 18 ready.

Thomas did not look back. He guessed the other teryx were now racing down the hill.

As they struggled closer Roxton fired several times, his bullets passing within feet of them. They reached the dock with Thomas almost completely carrying Gregory.

Roberts was ready with the submachine gun. As they drew beside her she opened fire with short bursts, backing on to the pier with them.

He looked up to see the boat within yards of the pier but it was travelling at speed. They were going to have to jump.

The machine gun fell silent in Roberts' hands.

Thomas shouted, 'Take him!' and she threw down her gun to help Gregory down to the end of the pier.

Roxton passed Thomas as he turned, pulling out both his pistols.

At least a dozen teryx were now gathering at the docks - a sinister coven converging fast on the pier.

The boat was feet from the end of the pier and men on board opened fire as Thomas tried to aim his pistols.

Suddenly one animal ran straight towards Thomas. Several bullets tore feathers and flesh off it as it headed for him. It was dead before it reached him, but its momentum carried it forward knocking him over. Pinned to the floor by its weight, he found himself smothered by spiky feathers and the stench of carrion. One of its lifeless claws dug into his leg.

The boat had now reached the pier. Roberts ran and, together with Roxton, dragged Gregory onto the deck.

Thomas, however, kicked and struggled to shift the teryx's body.

Four teryx were now speeding down the pier.

Thomas prised the claw out of his thigh and bolted for the boat. As he ran the vessel was already moving away. Without pausing he leapt into the air. He hit the railings hard, flipping over and crashing onto the deck. The world swam around him and, as he rolled on to his back, a teryx landed on the railing above him.

As it spread its arms he saw its claws stretch against the blue sky. Before it could drop down on to him, it was physically lifted off the boat by a hail of bullets from the top deck and dumped violently into the muddy brown waters of the Amazon.

Thomas moaned and slowly started to sit up.

Beside him Gregory was lying staring at the balcony above. He glanced at Thomas.

'Saved by the fucking doctor. I will never live this down,' he groaned.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Milly lay on the floor, her blanket rolled up under her chin, studying the corner of the room. The bright spring sunlight had reached it about quarter of an hour before and all sorts of things had happened since then. A careless *Heliophilus* had decided to warm itself inches from the mesh web of a hungry *Amaurotius*. While she waited for the scene to play out, Milly raked her brain for their species names.

Her father had given her an encyclopedic knowledge of animal names that she had once been so proud to recite. Now they were like wispy memories of childhood. She spoke them to herself for reassurance. She was happy with *similis* for the spider, but she could not think of the hoverfly's. *Amaurotius* among the shiny motes of dust in the mouth of her tunnel watching her meal move ever closer. The moment its legs became caught, she was out, grappling with it.

She had been held in the basement of a farmhouse for several days and had become convinced her German captures had forgotten about her. There were some potatoes and parsnips stored in the corner and she had helped herself to them. She was relieved her father was no longer alive to see her in this state. He would have been worried about her, of course, but most of all he would have been ashamed of her being labelled a spy like some poor man's Mata Hari. He had been against her working as a nurse saying 'War was no place for a woman' - but if he thought she had become a spy he would have been mortified.

She stayed there watching the unequal struggle between spider and fly until the sun warmed her hair and she drifted off. She was woken by the scrape of the key in the lock before three well-armed soldiers rushed in and forced her to the ground to handcuff her. Ever since they had found her standing amongst three corpses and a dead prehistoric dog, they had been very wary of her. Once she was safely cuffed, they bundled her out into the back of a waiting truck. Soon she was on a long straight road, heading west.

The back of the truck was open and, as it picked up speed, Milly shivered. A single guard sat opposite her watching the flat country roll past. Until a week or so ago this road ferried Allied supplies to the Front, but now all the earthworks, ramparts and defenses were abandoned, overwhelmed by storm troopers after the shock use of giant predators.

She had no idea where she was being taken, but they had only been on the road for a short while when she saw a huge brick wall rise up on the right hand side of the road. As they got closer she saw a squat central tower behind it and then realized that it was a square retaining wall. She didn't need local knowledge to guess this was Amiens' new prison.

The lorry slowed as it drew parallel with the vast wall and she prayed it would pull away again.

But it came to a halt next to the giant stone arch and the driver pressed his horn. After a moment the heavy wooden gates opened and the truck pulled in. Milly looked at the guard's face hoping for some clue to what fate lay inside the prison, but he was a picture of indifference.

The truck took her around one of its forbidding wings to a large courtyard under the shadow of the high outer wall. It stopped next to an area marked out by barbed wire. Inside this was a small knot of soldiers. One man sat apart in the corner. She had hoped she was not about to be incarcerated inside the vast prison, but she was not sure she preferred being dumped in a cage outside either.

The guard pulled her to her feet and pushed her out of the truck.

She fell to the ground, where another soldier dragged her into the barbed wire cage and left her there. For a moment Milly just lay there. Her hands were still bound and she saw no point in getting up.

'Ms Summerlee?' hissed a voice close by.

Milly rolled over and there, sitting amongst the captured soldiers, was Lieutenant Jones. He was slumped on the ground with one leg stretched out in front. She scrabbled to her feet and ran over to him. He had lost the sling she had made him and his trouser leg was soaked in blood.

‘Lieutenant! What happened?’

‘I got the bastard. It killed Mac and Benny, but when it grabbed for me I blasted its brains out with my Webley. Still made a bit of a mess of my leg.’

‘Let me have a look.’ She turned to the other men holding out her bound hands. To her surprise they were slow to respond, but eventually someone helped.

Once free she turned back to Jones. ‘So you lost the sling. Never mind there is more where that came from. Now …’

‘Did the Captain make it?’

‘Yes! Sorry, I should have said. Last time I saw him he was up in the big blue in a Sopwith, metal box in hand.’

‘Brilliant. But why did he leave you behind?’

‘Oh, turned out I had the same problem as you. I had your blood on my hands and one of those synapsid things was after me. I shot it too.’

‘Good for you.’

Milly began to rip his trouser leg.

Jones threw himself backwards and screeched in pain.

She stopped tearing. His lower leg was beyond repair. It looked like the predator had half chewed through it. Muscle and bone lay smashed together.

She moved up to his head. ‘They are going to have to take you to hospital for this one.’

Jones looked at her. ‘Darlin’, I don’t think that is going to happen.’ His eyes glanced across the courtyard.

For the first time Milly noticed four heavy posts set in the ground with manacles attached at the top.

‘No! No! There has to be a hearing, a process. They can’t just shoot us!’ She looked round and the other men turned away. Suddenly she felt herself begin to shake.

Jones reached out and grasped her hand. He said nothing for a moment as Milly struggled with the shock.

Eventually he whispered ‘Do you believe in God?’

Without thinking she murmured, ‘No. It is an absurd idea.’

‘Oh, well I do. I am chapel see. I promise you, it helps.’

‘Sorry. I didn’t mean … Sorry it is just my father didn’t like religions. I have never even been to a church service.’

‘Can’t imagine that. Don’t worry. I believe enough for both of us.’

‘It’s all his fault, you know. My father. He helped discover that ghastly plateau in the Amazon and all these creatures come from there. And my fiancee, Thomas. Well he’s not my fiancée anymore but … he should have been here helping you Tommies with the threat, but instead he has run off to the Amazon even though he knew there were sightings at Amiens. And … Of course you have to blame the authorities as well … They … They must have known something was up.’

Gradually Milly ran out of words and allowed herself to cry.

Jones squeezed her hands again. ‘You will find it easier if you don’t try to blame everyone else. Strikes me, a girl like you decided to be

here and the rest is out of your control.'

Milly looked up at the four posts through a blur of tear-stained eyes. She was more frightened than she ever thought possible.

Jones continued to talk gently to her as she shuddered and wept. Night closed in and Milly didn't let go of his hands. Jones talked about his home in Newport, his father who was a minister and his five sisters. As the dark hours passed he wrapped her in tales from the valleys. He had not met a girl. His Da' always said his sisters put them off. His Mam had died when he was young, but he knew he would see her again one day. In the darkness she learnt a whole life of being loved and loving. David Jones believed he was a lucky man, even if his life ended now.

'What about you Milly Summerlee? Tell me everything about you.'

Milly was not so eloquent, but trying to remember kept her mind off what might come in the morning. She began to talk about herself as if hearing it for the first time. Her father was a great man but had died recently. She had loved him but felt sad for him because he was so reserved. There was a kind, sweet man inside but no one else believed it and she could not find it. Her Mum had died several years before. She was like a brilliant light; loud, generous and warm. She came from Boston and taught Milly what it was to be independent. And her love was Thomas. Here Milly stalled. The thought of going to her death without making up with him, or even explaining herself, cut deep.

The night passed too quickly. Jones had helped her through the darkness but now reality arrived with dawn.

'David?' she said. 'It was Captain Malone who killed that young German soldier, wasn't it?'

'Yes. He always did the killing. Pulled the trigger, pushed the plunger. He wanted to.'

'I thought it was you. I'm sorry…'

‘Never mind. Doesn’t matter now, does it?’

In the cold morning light Milly looked round at their miserable cage. For the first time she noticed the man sitting alone in the corner, away from the other soldiers. To her surprise she realised he was German, a captain. He sat very still and upright. He had a clean-shaven, noble face with close-cropped, black hair. Milly was suddenly very curious.

‘David. Who is the German in the corner?’

‘No idea. He hasn’t said a word to any of us but, since he is in here, I must assume he is sharing our fate.’

Milly got up and walked over. She stood in front of him, but he completely ignored her. ‘Excuse me, do you speak English?’

The Captain closed his dark eyes and did not respond.

Milly tried again. ‘Sprechen Sie Englisch? Mein name ist Milly Summerlee.’

At the sound of her name the man frowned but still did not open his eyes.

Then in perfect, cut-glass English said. ‘You are not related to Professor Leo Summerlee, ammonite expert and explorer, are you?’

‘Yes! He was my father. He died a month ago.’

The Captain jumped to his feet and bent in a brief smart bow. ‘I am indeed mortified to hear that. I was privileged to hear him debate with Haeckle at Jena University. He was a great scientist.’

Milly couldn’t help smile. ‘Thank you and who is paying him this compliment.’

‘Captain Kurt Von Heket,’ he said bowing again. ‘And may I say his discoveries on the Japura Plateau changed my life completely.’

‘Are you anything to do with these creatures?’

‘I was, but it would seem no more.’

Milly was about to press him, but then everyone stood up. She turned and a group of soldiers was filing into the courtyard.

She staggered slightly and Von Heket reached out and held her shoulders.

‘Oh God! So soon,’ she cried.

‘Courage,’ said Von Heket. ‘The game is not over yet.’

She looked at him. He did seem remarkably relaxed for someone about to die.

The cage door was opened and the firing squad moved quickly to snatch four prisoners, including Jones who could not back away.

Milly rushed forward to help him but they closed the gate on her.

Jones cried out as they dragged him painfully across the yard towards the post.

Tears of anger and fear ran down her dirty face. She shouted out his name but he was oblivious to her. She looked back at Von Heket, who stood watching.

‘Can’t you do something? Appeal to your comrades.’

‘You forget, I have the same fate awaiting me.’

The squad manacled the prisoners’ hands and stepped back to form a line, while a captain fixed squares of white paper to their chests. Three of the prisoners struggled and shouted, but Jones just hung motionless on his post.

‘No! No! No!’ shouted Milly.

Jones suddenly looked up and stared straight ahead, as if he had seen someone beyond the soldiers.

She froze.

His face was calm and she watched as a slight smile spread on his lips. He mouthed a word. Then there was a crack of rifle fire and his body was jolted backwards. His head dropped onto his chest and he was gone.

Milly sucked in some sobbing gasps of air as the squad captain checked each of the victims. She sunk to her knees. The horror of what was happening knocked the fight out of her.

As she knelt there, two large staff cars pulled into the courtyard. A senior looking officer carrying a piece of paper got out and started a heated discussion with the captain of the firing squad.

Milly waited by the gate for the inevitable and Von Heket came and stood beside her.

The officer went over to the firing squad and barked some orders at them. Two of their number hurried over to the cage and opened the gate.

Von Heket bent down next to Milly and whispered in her ear. 'Follow me and do as I say if you want to live.' He held out his hand.

In a daze she took it and followed him out. The gate was shut behind her.

The senior officer approached Von Heket and offered him a coat. They talked, but Milly could not hear or understand what it was about. He turned back to Milly and gestured towards the car. 'You need to come with me, now.'

'Wait,' she said. 'Why?'

'You must come now or stay here and die against that wall in about five minutes time.'

She didn't look round at the other prisoners or at the bodies lying against the wall. Her mind churning with guilt and fear she climbed into the car. The cabin was warm and the back seat was covered in a

thick fur. Von Heket climbed in next to her. The engine started and the car carried her away from that place of execution.

For a while there was silence, then Von Heket spoke. 'I have been pardoned by General Ludendorff himself,' he said. 'I told them you had specialist knowledge that I needed.'

'You know you cannot trust me,' said Milly.

'I know.'

'Where are we going?' she asked.

'The circus I believe.' said Von Heket.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

In the car from the prison Milly looked out the window at row after row of damaged houses; windows blown and tiles missing. Von Heket talked and she listened but did not respond.

He told her that the German forces had overrun Amiens and were attempting to push on to Abbeville. The assault was led by their 'storm troopers' and that, combined with the strategic use of the creatures, had given them enormous momentum. The lines were moving so fast that artillery could hardly keep up on either side. But the Allies would dig in soon and then Amiens would be flattened as they attempted to break the Germans over-extended supply lines.

The car pulled up in front of Le Cirque Jules Verne in the centre of Amiens, an elegant monument to the carefree days of the fin de

siècle. As Milly was led through the grand Doric columns of the entrance she couldn't help wonder at what the builders would have made of its current use. Together with Von Heket she was led up some stairs to sit at back of the auditorium. Above, a vast iron girder ceiling held up a central cupola and, below, tier after tier of red seats formed a geometric pattern around the circus ring.

In the centre of the ring was a large cage, about twenty feet across and inside that a dinosaur.

Milly guessed it was some sort of adolescent megalosaurid - still a powerful animal but nothing like the size of the creature that was killed on the sidings. Again, along with the shock of seeing such an alien looking animal, she was struck by how colourful it was. Its skin was a patchwork of yellows and greens that darkened towards its extremities and a fine iridescent green down covered its body. However, what made the whole scene so profoundly disturbing was that the creature was going absolutely berserk and no one seemed to care. There was a stout wooden post in the centre that it kept attacking. It had already left several teeth and several claws imbedded in the wood. Its mouth was bleeding badly, as were its feet and claws, but still it attacked.

Milly tore her eyes away from the spectacle and saw a small knot of men in the seats below her watching. Most were wearing red uniforms, but one was the cruel general she had seen executing the giant carnivore. As the megalosaurid continued its frantic and futile attacks they just looked on impassively.

She turned to Von Heket. 'What are they doing? What is the point of this?'

Von Heket shook his head slowly. 'We are able to exert a certain amount of control over these creatures through neural plates implanted beneath their skulls. These plates have a number of contact points with the brain and, until now, we have only used the ones that affected the frontal lobes. It would seem my superior,

General Burloff down there, has ordered the use of contact points at the base of the brain.'

'Meaning?'

'Meaning that megalosaur in there is suffering indescribable pain and the only way it can cope is by attacking something, anything, and it will go on doing that until …'

'Until what?'

'It dies.' He stopped and she noticed small hints of emotion in his voice. 'General Burloff is the man who ordered my execution, he does not trust me because I don't agree with his tactics. He is a man in a hurry. He needs these animals to have an impact, now. And, even if they all die in the process, it will not matter to him.'

The General below must have heard them talking because he turned and caught sight of Von Heket.

Milly sensed the hatred they felt for each other.

The dinosaur started throwing itself at the cage; clawing and biting at the bars. By now there were hardly any teeth left in its mouth. Then, screeching and shrieking, it progressed to slamming its head against the metal. Finally its legs buckled and, with a strange whistling whimper, it collapsed dead on the floor of the ring.

The small audience waited for a moment and then the general waved his hands, exchanged a few words with those around him, and the group broke up. Without looking up he beckoned to Von Heket.

The Captain stood, straightened his jacket and walked down to face Burloff.

Milly waited and watched the exchange. The general had small, sharp features and bright dark eyes. He did not attempt to disguise his emotions. He was at once angry and scornful. He waved his

hands, raised his voice and pushed his face very close to Von Heket's. When he glanced up at Milly he sneered and laughed.

She was in no doubt what he thought of her.

In contrast, Von Heket gave nothing away. He did not flinch, smile or offer more than the briefest answers. The only unguarded moment she saw throughout the entire exchange was when the megalosaurid was dragged past and his eyes followed the corpse.

Burloff finished and stormed off.

An armed guard joined Von Heket and he called up to Milly to join him.

'We are to accompany the General to the Front in a luxury carriage. A front row seat in a gilded cage is how he put it.'

'But what about General Ludendorff?'

'Oh, it seems the Quartermaster General ordered my reinstatement, but Burloff remains my superior. He is not without influence I am afraid. So this is my fate. To follow him about and yet have no power. To witness everything but do nothing.'

'Then complain to Ludendorff.'

'Ha! Burloff will make sure there is no possibility of that. However, for now we are safe. Now please follow me.'

They returned to the staff car and it took them back to the station. An engine sat steamed up and ready to take them west. It was pulling a line of supply trucks but, at the back, were two coaches that reminded Milly of Pullmans. Ahead, Burloff was getting into one of them.

They climbed on board their coach, accompanied by their guard who locked the door behind him. Inside it was every bit as luxurious as anything she had ever seen. Wood paneled walls, lace curtains, thick patterned carpet and leather-upholstered chairs. Brass chandeliers

hung from the ceiling and crystal glasses were laid out on a central mahogany dining table.

Milly was suddenly aware how filthy she was and, as if reading her mind, Von Heket pointed her in the direction of the bathroom facilities at one end.

'Please make yourself comfortable. I would expect there are clothes there for you as well. Feel free to stay in your rags if you are uncomfortable accepting the hospitality.'

Milly ignored him and walked through to the changing room area. She selected the least fussy blouse she could find and a plain emerald skirt. She took these into the generous paneled closet. Here there was a large basin of warm water, shelves of soaps and scents as well as every conceivable piece of grooming equipment she could possibly imagine. She closed the door firmly behind her. Shut out the cruel, bloody world she had found herself in.

Reluctantly she looked in the mirror. It was not the same Milly Summerlee looking back. Black soot had gathered round her neck and ears and some orange sticky foam still clunk to her hair, presumably from the dying gorgonopsid. One cheek had several dark speckles of dried blood. But worse of all, in the middle of this vision her clear blue eyes stood out against her mud streaked skin as if accusing her of something.

As the train jolted into motion, she pulled off everything she was wearing and started to wash. She cleaned and scrubbed every inch of her body. Sponged off the mud of Flanders and the blood of others. She soaped and rinsed her hair before combing and combing it until her arms ached. When she looked again her face was still ingrained with fine dirt so she tipped out the basin of black water and started again.

Eventually she began to feel she was looking at the face she had become familiar with over the years - red with scrubbing but unmistakably her face. She found a grey ribbon around one of the

soap boxes and used that to tie her hair back. Then she raided the colognes and dressed. The blouse had a high collar that suited her slim neck. She checked herself in the mirror one last time.

As she opened the door she looked back and noticed Thomas' handkerchief on the floor. She bent down to pick it up and put it to her nose, but all she could smell was soot and blood. There seemed no trace of Thomas left. She closed her eyes and, for a moment, she let her shoulders sag. Then she took a deep breath, dropped the handkerchief back on the pile of her old clothes and closed the door.

Von Heket was concentrating on a map. She sat down opposite.

He looked up and smiled at her. As ever his responses were guarded, but she intuitively she could tell he had noticed more than she was now clean. Perhaps he was foolish enough to think she had cleaned up for his sake.

'Tell me about your father,' he said a little too formally.

'He was a good man but unworldly. He would despise you for what you have done to his plateau.'

'And your mother?'

'Treasured life above everything. She was from America and …'

'I know. Would hate me for everything I stand for.'

'Something like that.'

'You don't know me Milly. I never wanted any of this. I had other ideas when I went to the plateau. I was a scientist. The war has made us all do things we never thought ourselves capable of. Now I stand accused by the General of valuing the animals too highly and I confess it is true.'

She turned and looked out the window. She could tell he was looking at her but, after a moment, he sighed and went back to his map. If she was to survive she sensed she had to work him out. He

protested he was the victim of the situation, but his manner was more like that of the master.

The train slowed and braked. After a moment several soldiers ran back along the line to Burloff's coach. The rail line was on an embankment and, from her position, Milly could see across the flat countryside to the south. The roads were full of traffic and men and they also were at a standstill.

'We are a couple of miles short of Longpre,' said Von Heket. He pulled down a window and shouted at one of the men running past. The man stayed to answer his questions before heading off to see Burloff.

Von Heket turned back. 'The Allies have blown the line just northeast of Longpre-les-Corps-Saints. They have thrown up a trench system east of the town and are making a stand in the open. Sensible, they don't want to repeat the Villers-Bretonnex experience. Their gunners want to see anything attacking them from a long way off.'

He started rummaging through the coach's cupboards and draws until he found one full of maps. For the first time since she had met him his movements were quickened, even panicky. He threw several maps aside before finding the one he was looking for and laid it out in the table.

'Yes, obvious, of course.'

Despite herself, Milly's curiosity got the better of her and she walked over to the table to take a look.

'What is happening?'

'The Somme and its pond systems block off the north and the L'Eauette bogs stretch off to the south. The British are protected on both sides.' He indicated on the map how the German advance was being funneled towards Longpre.

‘A frontal attack is the only option. They have stopped the storm troopers, so now Burloff will deploy the creatures.’

A low soft drone from outside made him turn back to the window and look into the sky. Dozens of planes were approaching from the west.

‘British bombers. They will be spotting for the artillery. It is about to get lively here. We need to get out.’

Almost as he said it Burloff appeared from his carriage and scrabbled down the embankment to a waiting car.

‘Is he running away?’ asked Milly.

‘No, but he doesn’t want to be a sitting duck like us. We must get off the train before it is targeted. I will talk to the guard.’

Milly looked out at the panoramic view from the carriage window. Except for the troops on the roads everything was still. There was no wind and the countryside held its breath. Then the artillery barrage started. Across the fields, giant mushrooms of earth erupted out of the ground. She felt each thud through her feet. The explosions swept across the horizon, hundreds of shells throwing up a curtain of smoke and debris. Within minutes it was like the ground itself had started to boil. Mesmerized by the sight Milly just watched as the turmoil got closer and closer.

On the road a truck leapt into the air littering soldiers out of the back. Someone grabbed her shoulders and pulled her down onto the carpet. All the explosions now rolled into one long roar. A cloudburst of soil and stones rained down on their roof, then the carriage lifted and fell. Glass showered down on her and still the concussive onslaught continued. Milly did not know how long it lasted but, only when she started to hear herself screaming, did she realize it was easing off.

Von Heket dragged her to her feet and held her firmly. ‘Now we must go. That was the first of many.’

Milly looked about. The carriage was still intact but the elegant interior was destroyed. By the door the guard lay on the floor, dead. His neck was broken.

Von Heket jumped out and helped her down the embankment. Fresh craters steamed in every direction. Ahead, the huge train engine had been lifted and thrown down the slope where it huffed and wheezed like a defeated dragon.

Milly felt light headed and was weaving about on the road. Von Heket held her shoulders and forced her to look at him.

'You have a choice. Run away from Longpre and you might be able to find a quiet part of the front to cross back to the Allied side but, if my comrades catch you, you will be shot as a spy. Or I am going into Longpre, where your prospects will probably be worse.'

'Why are you going into the town? Won't it be chaos?'

'Yes. The Allies have caught the General in a bear trap. It will be a blood bath, but I have a job to do before he slaughters every one of the animals.'

She looked at his face. There was an intensity there she had never seen in a man before, an unshakable sense of purpose, or even justice. 'You want to make sure he doesn't escape, don't you?' she said.

Von Heket didn't answer, just bowed and then turned to head off west, into the heart of the battle.

Milly watched him for a moment, then rubbed her face and shook her head. She had to focus and make a decision. He heart told her to flee east but she knew she had to use common sense. Von Heket was a survivor and if he could see a way to exact his revenge amongst all that chaos then maybe Longpre would be the best place for her to cross the lines. After all how bad could it be compared to what she had already survived? Milly decided to hurry after him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

When Thomas woke there was a dull, rhythmic thumping in his skull and it seemed like his whole body was twice its normal weight. He was in a beautiful bunk looking up at a carved wooden canopy from which hung a mosquito net. Beside him was a mahogany table with a silver water jug and bowl. A chandelier gently swung in the centre of the room and the walls were covered in rich wallpaper and pictures of Amazonian birds. There was another identical bunk on the other side of the room. Gregory was asleep in it.

The dull thumping was the noise of the steamboat engine and he was in one of the more luxurious cabins. The night before he had dressed his own wounds and gratefully fallen into the bed's soft cotton sheets. But now, after several hours sleep, his body was paying him back for the abuse it had received. His knapsack was by the bed and, gingerly, he pulled it up onto his lap. Inside there was little left except the stinky bottle and his father's diary.

Gregory rolled over. His face was half covered in a bandage, as was one arm. He must have sustained considerable injuries but somehow had survived. For the first time Thomas had to admit he was impressed. Alone and being hunted by teryx, he had survived in the jungle for ten days and made it to the jetty.

The door opened quietly and Roberts' head peered round.

Thomas smiled and she came in. The mud of their desperate journey from the plateau had been scrapped away and clearly the only clean piece of clothing she had been able to find was a dress. Although she didn't seem to be trying in any way, Thomas could no longer deny he found her attractive.

'How are you feeling?' she asked as she sat on the edge of his bed.

'Fine. Just a bit stiff,' said Thomas.

She looked concerned and held his hand. ‘You were very lucky with that leg wound. It could have been a lot worse.’

‘Nothing a few days on a relaxing steamboat cruise won’t put right. Is it me who is still smelling so strongly?’

‘No, Captain Gregory was too ill to bath and he still smells of the teryx he fought.’ She looked at the floor. ‘Thing is. We are not out of the woods yet.’

‘If I didn’t know you so well, I would have suspected that was a pun.’

A smile splashed across her face, but soon disappeared. ‘It seems the teryx flock is tracking us along the right bank. We see one occasionally jumping through the trees, like some giant feathery monkey.’

‘But they can’t attack us on the water, can they?’

‘Not if we stay in the middle of the river. But this tributary gets shallow in places and the captain says that up ahead the navigable line goes very close to the right bank. We are going to have to go under over hanging trees.’

Thomas groaned. ‘This nightmare just goes on and on.’ He swung his legs round to get out of bed but she put a hand on his thigh and stopped him.

‘No you don’t. We have plenty of fit men upstairs and Lord Roxton insisted you stay safe in your bunk. Rodrigues prepared this boat before it came to our rescue. The lower two decks have been boarded up so nothing can get in there and the top deck makes an ideal gun platform.’

‘Is there any machine pistol ammo left?’

‘No.’

Thomas flopped back onto his bunk. He knew that men with rifles would not be enough to stop the teryx causing carnage.

Roberts looked into his knapsack and fished out his father's diary. 'Do you mind if I have a look through this?'

Thomas was wary of any one reading his father's uncensored streams of consciousness. 'I am not sure. It is full of his mad theories on life and mankind. I know *you* will understand, but if someone like Creed read it he would only find evidence of his insanity.'

She glanced at the sleeping Gregory and then placed her hand on Thomas' arm. She leant forward and kissed him on the forehead. Her lips were soft and warm. She pulled away but held her face very close to his. She smelt of frangipani blossom and, he noticed, her brown eyes had flecks of green in them.

'Don't worry, it is all just between you and me. That is the way I want it,' she whispered.

Thomas suddenly felt swamped by her gaze and blushed. 'Um. Let me know what you think of his notes on teryx communication. He cannot decide whether it is mediated by sight, or sound, or smell, or all three.' He was talking but even he wasn't listening.

'Fascinating. Meanwhile, you rest. I am just glad you are still in one piece.' Again she kissed him, but this time on the lips. Her touch was so delicate he hardly felt it, but he could taste her sweetness on his tongue.

Then she stood up, sighed and left with the book.

An hour later he was still awake. Freya Roberts was disturbing one of his deepest certainties. There was only Milly. There would only ever be Milly. He could not let that change. But, as he turned things over and over in his mind, he wondered if, now she was at the Front, Milly thought of him at all. Whether she really did want to move on

and find someone else. Despite their arguments, he had never dared think this before.

These were not thoughts he was used to and they exhausted him. He needed a distraction so, eventually, he made his way, painfully, up the stairs to the top deck.

It was early morning and, as he stopped for a breath, he was not prepared for the magnificent scene that lay before him. The boat was gliding down a sluggish river, almost invisible beneath a blanket of rising mist. On either bank an impenetrable wall of vegetation rose up a hundred foot, making it feel like they were floating down a green canyon. Flocks of red and blue parakeets burst among the dark branches like fireworks.

Thomas sucked in the warm, moist air and the rich smell of the jungle. At any other time this would have been a dream journey for him. After years of sitting in a bedroom in Enmore Park, reading about the exotic places his father had been, here he was living the adventure. He looked at the top deck. Half a dozen men stood around, rifles at the ready. The elegant mahogany railing, designed to give travellers the best view possible to the rainforest, had been reinforced with wooden planks to create defensive positions.

'Thomas, you will be no help to us up here if it comes to a fight.'

He turned and there was Roxton, sitting in a wicker chair with his bad leg in a splint.

'Oh, and you look ready to go head to head with a dinosaur,' replied Thomas.

'I can still hit an apple at 100 paces. I don't need my leg to do that. And the captain gave me this.' He pointed to a huge rifle propped up on a stand in front of him. 'It's a Mauser anti-tank rifle. Shoots thirteen mill hardened steel rounds and can penetrate armour plating. If I catch one of those feathery bastards with this it will tear it in half. There are seven other rifles here and more revolvers.'

‘All very impressive, but we are going to need to use our brains as well as brawn if we don’t want to continue this cruise with a dozen extra feathery passengers.’

A man with a smart tunic with gold buttons approached Thomas. ‘Welcome, Senor Challenger, on board the *Cahuapanas*. I am Captain Neves. Let me reassure you, we have come prepared for these monsters. This fine vessel has seen action before for the Peruvian military and, as you can see, we are well armed up here.’

‘Captain, thank you so much for risking your crew to come and rescue us. As I am sure the people who work these rivers are now aware, these creatures are like no other predator in the Amazon. My father has made a special study of them and, with your permission, I would like to take some measures to deter them from attacking us. Does your kitchen have any tin foil?’

The Captain looked at Roxton, who nodded his support. ‘By all means, go and tell the cook I sent you.’

‘And would you mind if took a hammer to your steam whistle?’

‘What?!’

‘Lord Roxton will guarantee the British Government will pay for any damage.’

‘I will?’ said Roxton.

‘Yes, you will.’

The Captain shrugged. ‘Do what you will. Just make sure you don’t get in the way when the shooting starts.’

‘How long do we have until we have to get close to the bank?’

‘In about four hours we come to a bend in the river. It gets very shallow and we will have no choice but to hug the right bank.’

‘Thank you,’ said Thomas and he limped off down the stairs to prepare.

The morning wore on and the mist cleared. With the help of a young cadet, Thomas set about badly damaging the ship’s brass whistle and wrapped their entire store of tin foil round some beading he pulled off the wall in the dining cabin. He was fast making himself very unpopular amongst the crew.

At around midday he went back to his bunk to get his back pack and found Gregory wide awake.

‘How are you feeling?’

‘I owe you a debt for saving my life, but you don’t have to pretend you are so sodding happy to see me, Challenger,’ grunted Gregory.

‘I am glad to hear you experience has not changed you, Captain.’

‘I have been through worse. They are just creatures. They can be killed. We were just caught with our pants down, that is all.’

‘You are right. They are just creatures and you were unprepared. The result is you lost all your men and you didn’t kill a single one of them. You are a tough man, Gregory, I will give you that. But you are also a stubborn ass.’

Gregory struggled with his reply. ‘You are probably right. But I did kill one, a big bastard. It stank. I fancy that is why they continued to pursue me even after they had fed.’

Thomas was prepared to believe it. His father had noted extremely strong social bonds within their flocks. He wondered again why the teryx had allowed them to escape from the Miranha village.

‘I hate to kick a man when he is down, but they are still at it. The teryx are tracking this boat and, when we get close to the bank, we expect them to attack. Meanwhile, you should try and get some sleep. There is nothing you can do now.’

As he was leaving he heard Gregory call after him. ‘And thank you for getting Roberts back alive.’

He returned to the top deck. Just as he arrived there was an enormous blast from Roxton’s Mauser.

‘My God, it’s got a kick like a cart horse,’ groaned Roxton rubbing his shoulder.

‘Did you see something?’ asked Thomas.

‘Maybe, but mostly I was trying to gauge how accurate it is. And the answer is not at all. I need a bit more time to practice with it.’ He loaded another huge bullet and adjusted the sights.

Thomas left the lord to his weapon and descended one deck to find Roberts sitting cross legged on a bench reading his father’s diary. He suddenly felt flustered and tried to quickly disappear down the second flight but she looked up and called out.

‘Thomas?’ He turned. ‘There was another reason you didn’t want me to read this notebook, wasn’t there?’

Thomas waited.

‘This whole thing is addressed to you and your mother. You go on about how arrogant and dismissive he was but you must have meant a lot to him. He bangs on about proving himself to the scientific world but I think by the end he is just as keen for you to know he wasn’t mad.’

‘So he put it in a book that no one would ever find,’ said Thomas.

‘But you did find it. You accuse him of being angry and stubborn while doing the same yourself.’

Thomas was not in the mood for this analysis. Besides what he really wanted to talk to her about was why she had just kissed him.

‘Why do care so much? I know you’re a spy for God’s sake and presumably by now your mission is complete.’

Her look hardened. ‘I know despite all *your* bluster you crave nothing more than his love and admiration that is why someone other than you had to read this notebook. It is too important to be hidden like the letters he sent to you. Have you really read it? Really read what he is saying?’

Thomas was utterly confused but before he could answer a shout from Captain Neves brought the exchange to an abrupt halt and he ran back up the stairs.

Downstream the river opened out and took a sharp turn to the left. Lining the right bank were several enormous kapok trees towering a hundred and fifty foot above the water. Clambering up their trunks and sitting in the branches were the black shapes of several teryx.

Thomas unrolled his tin foil and laid it on the deck and told Roberts to be ready to lift the beading in the air on his command.

Roxton swung his Mauser round and, about two hundred yards from the kapok, fired. The branch next to one of the teryx exploded in a cloud of splinters. Instantly all the teryx moved out of sight behind the wide boughs.

Roxton reloaded. ‘Clever devils aren’t they, and quick learners.’

The *Cahuapanas* drew closer to the river bend and started to manoeuvre towards the right bank. Soon the kapok trees were right over them.

As if on some silent signal, three dark shapes dropped out of the branches, falling in a tight curve towards the steamboat.

All the rifles started firing, but shooting vertically upwards at fast spiralling targets was almost impossible, even for a marksman.

Roxton’s rifle sounded and one of the teryx’s feathered arms was blown clean off, sending him spiralling into the water.

‘Now!’ shouted Thomas and lifted up the shiny tin foil on sticks and waved it about, creating a glittering confusion. At the same time the boat’s distorted whistle sounded, emitting a high-pitched squeal.

The two descending teryx stalled, both missing the top deck by inches. Under a hail of fire they carried on in a low arc to flounder in the shallows on the left bank.

Before anyone could draw a breath two more were dropping towards them. These were not so distracted by Thomas’s efforts and Roxton was still reloading his rifle. They landed heavily on the top deck. One was already badly wounded by the rifle bullets and collapsed where it landed but the other, instead of attacking them, disappeared down the aft steps.

‘Gregory! It’s after Gregory. It can smell him!’ shouted Thomas.

With an agility and strength that took Thomas by surprise, Roberts pulled the heavy Mauser out of Roxton’s hands and leapt down the stairs after the teryx.

Thomas hobbled after her.

Screams and shouts came from the lower decks, then the sound of smashing wood and five pistol shots in close succession.

He turned into the corridor to Gregory’s cabin just as he heard the Mauser’s blast.

Silence followed. Thomas approached the cabin with his revolver raised. The door had been ripped off and, inside, the rifle had blown a hole in the opposite wall. Roberts lay against the door, the giant rifle on her lap, holding her arm.

Lying draped over Gregory’s bed like some feathery black veil was the teryx. There was a hole as big as a fist in its chest. It was dead.

Thomas did not want to see what it had done to Gregory underneath.

‘He can’t be dead,’ she murmured. ‘I can’t have lost him having only just got him back.’

She climbed to her feet just as a muffled voice came from under the teryx. ‘What on earth was that sodding rifle?’

Thomas dragged the dead creature off Gregory. There he lay with a pillow in one hand and smoking revolver in the other, but otherwise no worse off than when Thomas left him an hour or two before.

‘It’s a Mauser anti-tank gun, since you ask,’ said Thomas trying hard to cover his relief to find the Captain alive.

‘That blunderbuss came just in time. My Webley was not going to stop him. Freya? Are you alright?’

Thomas turned and saw Roberts was back on the floor, still holding her arm.

‘Sorry Alec. It managed to bite me.’

It was then that Thomas noted a red stain spreading over her white sleeve. ‘Let me have a look,’ he said. He knelt down and picked her up. She was light and far more delicate than he had imagined. He put her on the bed and sat beside her, lifting her hand off her arm. It was a deep cut but it looked clean. He grabbed some bandages and started to wrap the wound tightly.

‘Don’t worry, it doesn’t look too bad. I need to get back upstairs to help Roxton, but as soon as we are out of trouble I will be back down to dress it properly.’ He looked in her eyes and touched her cheek.

As he turned to leave he took a closer look at the stinking feathered heap on the floor. In death it was an odd spindly creature. There wasn’t an ounce of fat on it. Its body looked like nothing but tendon and sinew wrapped in pale grey scaly skin. Its black feathery covering was actually quite sparse with a scaly, feathery wrap. Long flight feathers fanned out from its arms but it could not fly and did

not have the large breast muscles of a bird. However, its leg muscles bulged with power. He pulled its head round and caught a finger on its razor sharp teeth.

'Careful doctor! Even dead they are dangerous,' said Gregory. Thomas smiled. 'As I said, you're a tough one, Captain, and not a little bit lucky. I'd better get back up top. Here, take this; they might try again.' He handed him his fully loaded pistol.

'Would prefer the Mauser.'

'We need that up top. I will lock the door at the end of the corridor. It's metal.'

Thomas headed back up to the top deck and noticed the firing had stopped. As he reached the top of the stairs, a shot pinged right over his head. He ducked down and looked behind him. The steamboat was now pulling away from the bend and out into the centre of the river. The kapok stand was a hundred yards away. Several teryx were dropping down from the trees, but this time back into the forest.

'I missed the bloody teryx but almost bagged you, Thomas,' shouted Roxton.

'Is it over? Will they attack again?'

Captain Neves shook his head while reloading his rifle. 'I doubt it. The Japura just gets wider from here and, in a day, we should make the main river. If they are as smart as you think they will give up.'

Roxton eased himself out of the wicker chair. 'God this leg is agony. So, Thomas, how'd'you think they knew Gregory was downstairs? Beats me why they bothered with that arsehole.'

Thomas rubbed his temples. He was tired. 'Captain, do you have any ice on board? We have a very valuable specimen downstairs and I want to preserve it for the trip back to London.'

'Are you all right?' said Roxton. 'You are lookin' a bit peaky.'

He felt like he had been poisoned, but he shook his head. ‘Just a little tired.’

‘Dr Challenger!’ This time the shout was from below deck. It was Gregory. Unsteadily Thomas set off downstairs.

Gregory had crawled into the corridor beckoning him. ‘Quick, I think she is having a fit.’

Thomas entered the bedroom and saw Roberts convulsing on the bed.

He rushed forward and grabbed her by the shoulders. Her body arched under him and she groaned in pain.

‘Freya! Freya! Dammit Gregory, what happened?’

She was burning up. He grabbed the silver jug of water and tried to get her to force some water between her lips.

‘It’s the bite, Doctor.’

‘Poison in its saliva. Damn, damn, damn. I should have guessed. Stay with me Freya. We will get through this.’

Her body relaxed, but then she began to shake. She was flushed and sweating.

He gently eased her back on the bed and began to undress the wound. ‘I am not letting you go. Can you hear me? We are going to beat this.’

But Roberts just shook as the teryx toxin took hold of her body.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

‘They will move the Biowaffen carriages up tonight and use the cover of darkness to deploy. They have to,’ said Von Heket. ‘The

British are preparing for a major counter attack and the next time our lines will not hold them.'

When Von Heket and Milly had first arrived in Longpre, several divisions - led by storm trooper units - were close to dislodging the British from their hastily dug in positions just west of the town. But the Allies had the higher ground and had managed to stall the German advance. With each day they held out they had only got stronger, with fresh American troops arriving and deeper trenches being dug. Meanwhile the Germans, exhausted and over stretched, had got ever weaker.

Then the counter offensives had started. Within days Longpre had been flattened. What had once been streets and buildings were now no more than piles of rubble and lonely walls. Word had come down from Ludendorff to hold the town at all cost, but the enemy gunners were on the raised ground and defeat was inevitable. They needed a miracle and everyone on the German side now believed that the creatures were that miracle.

Milly and Von Heket were hiding in the crypt under ruins of the church. From a hole in the wall they looked out on what was left of the cross roads at the centre of the town. They had been watching the ceaseless movement of supplies by the Germans up from the station. Their front line was now very close. Built out of the rubble of Longpre it was only about a hundred yards to Milly's right. The allied line was visible a couple of hundred beyond that on the rising ground. Even she could see what a hopeless position the Germans had found themselves in. As for her plan, that somehow she could sit tight while the allies regained the ground around her, she now realized was naïve. It was more likely she would be ground into the dust along with everything else in Longpre before any friendly flag flew here.

'Much as I detest the General,' Von Heket said suddenly, 'I cannot help but feel sorry for him. After Villers-Bretonneux the General Staff believed the Biowaffen Unit could do anything. They are about to be

cruelly disappointed. I suspect the whole show is going to be over very quickly.'

Milly had watched Von Heket for a number of days now and still could not work him out. Sometimes he was talkative and friendly, other times quiet and withdrawn. She had tried to reach out to him and talk about the way he had been treated but he was hiding from her and she could feel it. He was, however, the only reason she was still alive and, at least for now, it was very clear his primary intention was revenge. Despite all the bombing and troop movements, nothing distracted Von Heket from his focus on the town hall.

'Where is Burloff?' asked Milly.

'Still in the command centre under the Town Hall. I cannot get close to him, even with my contacts, but I have what I need. You see that staff car against the wall over there? He has had it specially prepared. I can guarantee that car is his escape route and, by the time he makes his move, I will be ready.'

'If you try and kill him, there will be witnesses. You will not escape.'

'My weapon will not be a gun.'

A long haunting screech echoed up from the station to the east.

'Ah! It begins,' said Von Heket.

In the last few hours, German activity had concentrated on clearing the rubble to make the main road from the station wider and creating an embankment either side. The sun was setting and the sky flaring red over the enemy trenches. In the gathering gloom Milly could see a crowd of dark shapes moving towards them up the main road. She felt nausea rise inside her. She was about to witness a terrible gamble that, whichever way it went, was guaranteed to end in carnage.

The smell and noise of prehistoric animals filled the evening air.

Masked, red-suited handlers started to swarm into position. She could hear the hum of a hundred neural plates began to buzz. Then predatory dinosaurs of all shapes and sizes began to move past her position in the church towards the front, all with their heads bowed and twisted in pain. Most had large leather harnesses fixed around their necks, which she knew to be bombs. It looked as if they had been dressed for battle.

Prodded, dragged and coaxed they headed west. As a twenty-foot long megalosaurus was dragged past where Milly was hiding it began to resist. The handler twisted the controller dial and the distraught creature opened its bowels. A huge quantity of waste hit the ground, right in front of the ruined crypt splattering her head and shoulders.

The terror everyone talked about, the fear that was meant to grip enemy soldiers, was shared by the creatures. Everyone and everything was frightened now. Longpre had become a place of primeval dread.

Milly started to shake. Her heart was racing so fast she felt she might faint. She leant against the wall and tried to take deep breaths. In the middle of the screeches, shrieks and stench, Milly was sick.

Von Heket took no notice of her. He was pulling on a General's coat. His expression was blank but his eyes shone. He fitted a handlers mask on and, without a word, clambered out through the broken wall.

Milly watched as he moved unnoticed among the other handlers as if looking for something. It was time for her to run. There was no hope for anyone in this place and she had to get out whatever the cost.

Just as she was deciding to make her move, she noticed Von Heket standing with a controller in his hands. Most of the beasts had moved past but in front of him was one of the largest dinosaurs she had ever seen.

It was a fully-grown allosaurus. Two powerful legs carried a long sinewy body, long clawed arms and a large, blood-red head. It slunk towards Von Heket and dropped its front towards him in what looked like a grotesque sign of obedience.

He stepped forward and kicked the reptile as hard as he could in the nose. It writhed and pulled its head back.

He adjusted his controller and again it dipped down.

Next he rubbed his coat sleeves over the nose of the creature and kicked it hard again. Then he handed the controller back to the handler and walked away.

It was night now and the animals had all moved past. Milly prepared to run under the cover of darkness when a series of pops from the west saw rockets shot into the sky over Longpre and explode into magnesium flares. A harsh white light instantly illuminated the entire town. The British were not going to be surprised so easily this time. In the ghostly light she could see the attack had already begun. A mass of creatures was racing up the hill towards the Allied trenches.

On cue, machine guns and rifles all along the brow exploded into action. Still the hoard of swift predators closed on the front line.

Milly clambered out of the crypt only to see Von Heket standing motionless two or three yards to her left. He had taken off the coat but still wore the mask. He was not looking at her but concentrating on the hill.

The advancing pack was close to the brow when, all at once, it was as if an invisible force blew through them. Some stopped, some veered off and others turned back. In an instant the deadly wave heading for the enemy trenches became a mass of confused animals.

Von Heket nodded very slightly and then shouted to her. ‘See! Your comrades have decoded the controller. They must be transmitting a blocking signal.’

After a moment or two, and even as some animals turned and began to race back towards the German lines, the foremost started to explode. With their signal being blocked the Biowaffen handlers had realized they were in as much danger as the allies. The bombs the creatures were meant to carry on their shoulders deep into the enemy's front line where now being detonated by the handlers in self-defence. One after another the panicked animals were ripped apart by their own bombs.

The explosions had little effect on the Allies in their trenches, who continued to pour fire down the hill. Terrified and directionless, the giant prehistoric creatures were now being annihilated by both sides.

From where she stood Milly could see the whole horrific event unfold on the hillside. Tears filled her eyes and ran unchecked down her dirty cheeks. Eventually, exhausted by the slaughter, she sunk to her knees, shut her eyes and covered her ears - hoping it would all end.

A deafening screech from behind her made her turn. The huge allosaurus that Von Heket had bullied had already made it back to the town centre. It carried no bomb and since its clamp no longer worked it had turned on its handlers. One was flung through the air and, even as the others scattered, it plucked a second off the ground and tore him in half, swallowing his torso whole.

Milly slowly began to move back towards the safety of the ruined crypt. Then she noticed Von Heket remained unmoved in the open only metres from where the creature was consuming the handler. He was waiting.

Out from under the town hall hurried a familiar figure and Milly understood.

General Burloff knew the Biowaffen project had failed. Longpre was about to fall and he did not intend to be there for the surrender. Clutching a suitcase of papers he headed for his car.

Disguised behind his mask, Von Heket ran over and offered the General his coat. Distracted, the General let the Captain throw it over his shoulders and continued towards the car.

A deafening bellow brought Burloff up short. In his hurry he had not noticed the allosaurus eating further up the street.

In the light of a new flare the allosaurus picked up the General's movement. Its mouth dripping blood, its nostrils flaring it also picked up his scent – the scent of the coat Von Heket had given him. It twisted its head and focused on Burloff's face, recognizing the smell of the man that had just been kicking and torturing him.

Burloff looked back and saw Von Heket standing there. He removed his mask and bowed slightly at the General.

For an older man Burloff moved fast. He dropped his suitcase and pulled out his Luger, fired twice at Von Heket and then sprinted for his car, shooting at the allosaurus as he ran. But it was hopeless.

The monstrous killer streaked across the crossroads and had him in his jaws before he had made twenty yards.

Violently he shook him and then threw him to the ground. Curiously, it then stood back and lowered its head to look closely at its victim.

To her horror Milly realized Burloff was not dead. As he started to try and crawl away the predator's head darted forward, fastening on to his arm and flipping him over. Then it stepped back again, waiting for him to move. It was playing with him. Like a cat with a mouse, it was not going to let the General die easily.

She looked back at Von Heket who was kneeling on the ground his head bowed. Something was wrong. As she watched he fell forward and lay still.

More flares popped in the sky and she could see the battle on the hill was changing. A division of British Whippet tanks appeared over

the rise and started advancing through the last of dinosaurs, blasting them at close range with their heavy weapons.

The defending Germans would not last long and already a few individuals were running through the streets heading east, back to Amiens. Allied shells began to land on the rubble defences, shaking the ground and pulling a dusty vale across the scenes of carnage on the hill.

As if it was possible for things to get worse, Milly then noticed blue smoke was drifting up the street towards her. As a last ditch defense someone was going to release the protoscorpions and giant centipedes into the ruins of Longpre.

Ignoring everything around her, Milly ran for Burloff's staff car.

She jumped in the driver's seat and thanked the Lord the key was waiting in the ignition. Gunning the engine she reversed away from the wall and found herself a few feet from where Von Heket lay. She paused and tried to think logically. She didn't trust him, but she had no choice but to head east into Germany to escape the carnage and he had, for whatever reason, saved her life before.

She jumped out of the car and rolled Von Heket over, grabbing him under the shoulders and dragging him towards the back door. She could see he had a nasty head wound from one of Burloff's bullets but it did not run deep. Desperately she tried to shove him into the back of the car but he was too heavy.

She looked up to see more soldiers running back into the station yard. They paused at the sight of the allosaurus eating Burloff, but Milly knew they would soon realize what she was doing. Behind them she could see the blue smoke creeping ever nearer.

Von Heket groaned and moved.

'Get in the car!' she screamed in his ear.

With her pushing, and him helping she just managed to bundle him into the back seat.

Finally, she slammed the door and jumped into the driver's seat, accelerating past the feeding predator and out of the doomed town of Longpre.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Thomas jolted awake as his book fell off his lap onto the floor. He sat up in his chair and rubbed his eyes. He was in Captain Neves' cabin. It was smaller than the one the teryx had attacked Gregory in, but was as comfortable and didn't have a hole in the wall. Roberts lay in the captain's bed, sleeping fitfully. She was still running a high temperature and her pulse was racing. Gregory sat in the seat next to him, fast asleep. He had insisted on keeping vigil with Thomas, even though he had still not fully recovered and there was little he could do to help. Thomas wouldn't have minded, but the nature of the Captain's injuries meant he still hadn't bathed.

Thomas took a damp cloth and moped her brow. She muttered but did not wake up. Even with his medical training all he could do was feed her thirst and pray she was strong enough.

Neves put his head around the door. 'I think Lord Roxton is ready. Would you like me to assist you? I am sure the Senorita will be safe

with Captain Gregory.'

Thomas sighed. He was not looking forward to this. He picked up a bottle of rum. 'Thank you. May I borrow this?'

'Be my guest, Doctor.'

Thomas set off down the corridor and returned to his old cabin. Following his instructions Roxton had been placed in his bed. On a side table was a large bowl of steaming water and a beaten-up wooden case containing an old, American Civil War amputation kit.

Thomas's bed had been stripped of its mattress and fine sheets, so Roxton lay on scrubbed wooden planks.

He offered Roxton the bottle of rum but he waved it away.

'Never was my drink,' he said. 'How is the girl?'

'Not good. Everything about those animals is vile. Here let me check the leg one more time,' said Thomas.

'You are stallin', young fellah. You looked at the damn thing less than an hour ago and we both know it is only goin' to get worse. Should've had this done years ago. It was vanity really. Pure vanity. Didn't want a blasted wooden leg. Well, look where that got me! Instead of pretty nurses and a nice hospital bed in London, I am halfway up the Amazon starin' at your ugly mug. No offense.'

'None taken, Lord John. I am just going to press the shin and tell me if it feels any more numb.'

Thomas looked at Roxton's swollen leg. The toes had darkened visibly in the last 24 hours and the skin was flaking off. After falling from the airship, the forced march from the plateau must have shifted the shrapnel in his calf and, in the heat of the jungle, it had not taken long for gangrene to set in. He lightly pressed just above the ankle.

Roxton grabbed both sides of the bed and grimaced. It was a moment or two before he shook his head.

Thomas fitted the tourniquet and then went to the bowl of hot water. In it were the brutal instruments he needed for the amputation. The old kit had been filthy when Captain Neves had produced it with a triumphant flourish earlier and it had taken two hours of scrubbing and sterilising before he was prepared to use them. He picked up a long slim Catlin knife, then turned to Neves, who signalled a crew member from the corridor to help. One man grabbed hold of Roxton's shoulders, the other held him down at the hips.

He took a deep breath, and then quickly cut the skin round the leg just below the knee. Roxton's whole body convulsed and he let out a long, agonised scream. Thomas held on firmly to the leg as he finished his first cut.

He dropped the Catlin and picked up a brass handle saw but, as he did so, Roxton's body went limp. To Thomas's enormous relief, he realised he had fainted.

'Got lucky there,' said Neves. 'I have seen some last the entire operation.'

Thomas hurried to finish the amputation. After ten minutes he completed bandaging the stump and washed his hands in the bowl.

'Nice work, doctor,' said Neves, 'but I am afraid that leg needs to go. It stinks.'

Thomas picked up Lord Roxton's lower left leg and went up on to deck.

He leant on the rails and watched the brown water slip by the hull. They had passed Santarem that morning where the blue waters of the Tapajos mixed with the muddy Amazon. Under any normal circumstances he would have been fascinated by this natural spectacle, but today there was just too much on his mind. By now

the river was so wide it was hard to make out the banks. They had lost the reassuring sight of the trees moving by so that, although they were travelling at the same speed, it felt like they had slowed.

Without ceremony he tipped the limb overboard into the river. He knew Roxton would appreciate the gesture, as would the local catfish.

He didn't notice Captain Neves come up the stairs beside him and join him at the rails. 'What do you think, doctor?'

'He will wake up in pain,' said Thomas. 'He needs drugs and proper doctors. Maybe we should have dropped him off in Manaos.'

'You know he refused to allow that. It will be all right. It is only another three days to Para.'

'I have been spoilt by airship travel. This journey seems to have taken an eternity.'

'The *Cahuapanas* might be slower, but it is very unlikely it will ever blow up and incinerate half of its crew. On another matter, I am afraid you will have to do something about that carcass you have downstairs. It is beginning to rot, and I am afraid one of my crew might just throw it over board unless you can find somewhere other than a lower deck cabin for it.'

'It is vital I get it to an experienced anatomist, Captain. You must appreciate how important it is to study this creature as soon as possible.'

'I, of course, understand. But not all of my crew are so enlightened. There are some who believe it is a devil and will bring us bad luck. I am just warning you, Dr Challenger, that unless you do something the monster might not make it to Para.'

'Perhaps we could hang it overboard in netting or something above the water, but away from all the crew?'

The Captain looked pained. ‘I will have to be the one who helps you with it. I don’t want a mutiny.’

Together they went down to the lower deck. It was true, the teryx smelt appalling. As they approached the cabin the air in the corridor was fetid. They opened the door and it was if there was no oxygen in the room.

Neves gagged.

The teryx had been left on the floor wrapped in a sheet and there were already clusters of flies crawling over its folds. As they moved it, Thomas noticed its rotting intestines had leaked and already stained the floor boards. It was beginning to look like the only way he would get his prize back to London was in a bucket.

Together they dragged the corpse on to deck and suspended it over the side in a net. As they were doing this some of the crew appeared with mops and disinfectant, muttering about ‘demonios’ under their breath.

Once they were done Thomas went back to the Captain’s cabin to see how Roberts was doing. To his surprise Gregory was holding her hand. He moved to one side when Thomas appeared and settled down without a word to sleep in the corner.

Thomas noticed his father’s diary on the bedside desk and began to thumb through it. Absentmindedly he reached in his pocket and pulled out the engagement ring, turning it over in his fingers as he read.

‘Whose is the ring?’ asked Roberts. She was watching him. She looked impossibly pale and there were dark shadows under her eyes.

‘Nothing. Just a family heirloom. How are you feeling? Do you want some water?’

‘You have played with it all journey. It is not just a ‘nothing’. It looks like an engagement ring.’

Thomas was about to deflect again, but then he realised those large brown eyes would see through his lies. ‘It is. It belonged to Milly Summerlee. She was my fiancée until she broke off our engagement and threw it at me.’

She smiled. ‘I wonder why she did that.’

‘I forbade her to go back to the Front to nurse.’

‘You men can be so dumb sometimes. You grandly call it love, but it comes across as possession.’

She was interrupted by a coughing fit and Thomas picked up a glass of water, but she waved it away. ‘The diary, Thomas, I am worried.’

Glad at the change of subject he replied. ‘Please don’t start on our father/son relationship again.’

‘No. It is not that. It lies behind that. You are right he does mellow. He becomes more reflective and what comes out is dangerous. His ideas, his Eden.’

‘Oh. But you know it is just him sounding off.’

‘That is what I thought.’ She stopped, exhausted, and closed her eyes.

Thomas waited to see if she would fall asleep again. Her breath seemed shorter and he could hear her chest rattle.

She tried to say something so Thomas drew closer and tried to quieten her. ‘Don’t worry we can talk about it when you are stronger.’

‘They are dark ideas. They are not harmless rants,’ she whispered. ‘You have to tell Creed everything, especially the association with Von Heket.’

‘Why? Who is he?’

‘You are a good man Thomas … but I am not sure your father was.’ Then she seemed to drift off to sleep.

It was late afternoon when Neves came to tell him Roxton had come round.

'And about the carcass, Doctor. I am afraid the crew are still not happy. Can we…'

'Not now Captain, I am sorry.'

Thomas left Neves standing on the deck and hurried along to the cabin. As he entered the room, there was a powerful waft of disinfectant. Roxton lay among clean sheets with his eyes open.

Thomas filled a glass with water from a jug on the bedside table and sat carefully next to him. 'Drink?' he said.

Roxton looked up at him. His usual weathered complexion was pallid and his lips bloodless. He lifted his head slightly and Thomas helped him drink.

'Still feels like it's there,' he said.

'And the pain?'

'Agony, and then sometimes worse. I say, you haven't seen that package Rodrigues gave me, have you?'

Thomas shrugged. He assumed the cocaine had been lost when they boarded the ship. 'No. I am sorry I have nothing to give you. I lost the morphine I had.'

'Just could do with a smoke.'

It was going to be tough enough to survive the amputation but on top of that he was going to have to deal with the cravings. 'I wish there was something I could give you…'

'We did well, didn't we? Played the game.'

'Back to your best, my Lord. What tales you will be able to tell.'

Roxton closed his eyes and swallowed hard. 'To who?'

‘You will be the talk of the town again.’

He shook his head slowly. ‘My world is lost, Thomas. The blasted war saw to that. The adventure for God and the Empire.’

He tried to shift his stump but didn’t have the strength. ‘I miss Malone the most. We had good times together. He would have loved this - the last hurrah eh, young fella’ m’lad.’

Thomas struggled to reassure him. He was right and they both knew it.

Suddenly the Lord became more animated and grabbed his arm. ‘Watch that Roberts. You promise that. Don’t trust her smiles. She and Gregory are a pair.’

Thomas hadn’t really expected this subject to come up and, together with Roxton’s wild expression, his automatic response was to laugh.

‘Don’t worry, I know she is Creed’s woman. But it doesn’t really matter now, my Lord. She is very, very ill. I doubt she will have the strength to be any trouble for a long time.’ Roxton then became distracted, so Thomas checked the bandaged stump and then sat with him for a while. He slept.

Night came and he returned to Roberts. He picked up his father’s diary and went back to reading it, trying to understand what she had meant. Looking for new meaning in the references to Von Heket, but there was little that made sense. For the most part the notes were mundane and technical, but occasionally he became excited, legibility deteriorated and the ideas did become more far-fetched.

In one particular section, he described a night spent in a tree observing a group of teryx after they had brought down a female pithecanthropus. In the passage his observations were not confined to the scene of the killing. He clearly admired the skill of the hunters and used this as an example of the brutal beauty of the plateau. He ended up extemporizing on what the rest of the world could learn from his cruel Eden. Was this the sort of thing that worried Roberts?

To Thomas it was just his father's usual intellectual bluster. He fell asleep in his chair dreaming of teryx.

In the morning he was once again woken by Neves, but this time the captain did not call his name. He just touched his arm. Thomas looked up and instantly knew something was wrong.

'It's his Lordship.'

He walked slowly down to his old cabin. Lord John Roxton lay on his back. Someone had slicked down his hair and put him in new shirt. Thomas knelt down beside the bed and reached over to hold his hands. Despite the tropical temperatures they were icy cold. His old friend had finally lost his battle. Not with any thing as mundane as an infected leg but with a whole new world that had left him behind. As Thomas looked as his strong features, already pale and waxy white, it reminded him of one of those marble statutes in a municipal square to a forgotten hero. No one Thomas knew or had known behaved like Roxton or even thought like Roxton. He was a missing link to a bygone age of adventurers that the world was probably poorer with out. The war had exterminated his kind and a new generation would take over without the benefit of their wide horizons. The flail of the Lord, was dead but in a posthumous triumph he had managed to die, not in a muddy trench like so many of his comrades, but fighting monsters in the Amazon.

Thomas found himself smiling at how much Roxton would have appreciated that epitaph but then his eyes fell on the failed amputation and at the thought of all the pain the old man had been through his mood darkened. He was seized with the idea it was all the teryx's fault. Roberts fighting for her life, the Accala exterminated and now Roxton dead.

He squeezed Roxton's cold hands one last time and then headed off down the corridor. He grabbed a knife from the amputation kit and went out on to the lower deck. There, dangling over the side, was the stinking corpse of the teryx. He pulled up one of the ropes and was about to cut it and let the catfish feed on its fetid remains when

the cloth fell open and he found himself staring at the grinning face of the dead teryx. It eye sockets were no more than pools of maggots and its dry skin pulled so tight the teeth were exposed from root to tip, giving it a creepy smile. It was mocking his futile act of revenge.

Thomas let go of the rope and leant on the rails. He was out on deck but it still felt like he needed fresh air. The humidity and the stench of corrupted flesh seemed to suffocate him. His head began to spin. As he staggered sideways a hand grabbed his shoulder.

'Hold it together boy. Now is not the time to faint.'

Thomas looked round and saw Gregory's face close to his. He was pale and leaning heavily on a stick but his expression was fierce. 'We have company.'

Thomas looked further down the deck. There was a group of half a dozen crewmen approaching and they were carrying weapons.

Thomas swallowed and tried to steady himself. 'What do they want? Are they going to kill us?'

'Maybe, if you are stupid enough to get in the way. My guess is they want that carcass off the boat.'

'No! I will not let that happen. Where is Neves?'

The men stood before them. Thomas found himself gripping his knife.

The largest of them stepped forward holding a machete. 'O demonio deve ir!' he snarled.

'You don't understand,' protested Thomas. 'Scientists need to study this creature. The world needs to know what we are dealing with.'

'Afastar-se, senhor.'

Gregory was beside him. ‘Don’t be an ass, Challenger. It is you or the corpse. We need to get to Para in one piece and catch a ship back to Britain.’

‘But no one will believe me. It will be like my father all over again.’

‘This is not about fucking reputations. This is about telling Creed and saving men’s lives. Now cut the rotten lizard free and maybe they won’t throw you in with it.’

Thomas looked at the men in front of him. It was not anger in their eyes but fear. To them the specimen he was so determined to save was the devil itself and, dead or alive, it was dangerous.

‘Damn it!’ he shouted as he turned and slashed through the ropes that held the carcass against the boat. The cloth flapped open and the dark shape of the teryx dropped into the swirling waters of the Amazon and disappeared. The stench vanished with it and he drew a long breath.

‘There. Now that wasn’t that difficult was it?’ said Gregory. ‘I promise, when we get home we will find out what the Germans have done with these feathery bastards.’

The crew members gradually melted away and they were left alone. Gregory went to return to Robert’s cabin, but he stumbled and fell heavily against the rails.

Thomas offered him an arm.

The captain looked at him for a moment then smiled and took the offer of support. ‘I am sorry about his Lordship. We did not see eye to eye, but he was a brave soldier and a man of principle.’

Thomas nodded. ‘I think his biggest fear would have been an irrelevant death - fading away in some lonely room. But he fought his final battle and died victorious.’

Then he remembered Roxton’s final words. ‘I have to ask. Lord John told me that he thought you and Roberts were… well… were not just

comrades in arms.’

Gregory laughed out loud. ‘”Not just fucking comrades in arms!” You really are a one off Challenger. Well, there is no harm in you knowing now. Roxton really was barking up the wrong tree. She’s my damn sister.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

About a mile east of St Quentin Milly found a piece of woodland that had not been devastated by years of shelling. She pulled off the road and drove down a narrow path until the car was no longer visible

from the road. She turned the engine off and rested her head on the wheel.

The last fifty miles of driving had utterly exhausted her. All night and into the morning she had pushed and swerved her way round troops, trucks and artillery trying to move west. The chaos caused by the collapsing front had helped, but the further east she went the more organised things became. She ran at least one road block – the soldiers too surprised to even think to stop an official staff car – but, as she approached St Quentin itself, she had encountered a much more substantial one.
Fortunately, as the soldiers had come to her window, Von Heket had barked something from the back seat. She noticed he had put on some of Burloff's clothes so he appeared like a badly wounded General. This got them through the city but, once they were clear, she could drive no more.

'He has packed everything in here,' came a voice from the back. 'Food, drink, spare clothes, weapons and, fortunately, a First Aid case.'

Milly looked back. Blood was still seeping from Von Heket's head wound.

'Oh, you will live,' she said. 'I need something to eat and drink first.'

Von Heket had already thought of that and handed her a hunk of bread with ham and cheese in it, together with a bottle of apple juice.

She eagerly grabbed them and both sat in silence while they ate.

'Something really stinks in here,' said Milly eventually.

'It's you,' replied Von Heket. 'Did any of the dinosaurs spray you?'

She remembered the frightened megalosaurus. Without knowing why she started to laugh. Soon she was laughing so much she could

not stop. Shock and relief swept over her. It was impossible to believe what she had just lived through.

Von Heket wasn't laughing. 'We need to get further from the line. Keep moving east, head for Luxemburg.'

Gradually she sobered up. 'I was thinking north to the coast.'

'What, and drive parallel to the Front? Believe me, you do not want to be anywhere near a collapsing line. You are just as likely to be blown up by a British shell as shot by a German.'

'I don't want to go deeper into bloody Germany. One; it is your country not mine, and two; I don't trust that you won't just hand me in at the first chance. And three… I want to go home.'

'Move anywhere and you will still be in Germany. I saved your life and I didn't need to. You saved my life and you didn't need to. I think that is the closest we can get to trust. Let me suggest this: head east to Luxembourg as I said, and then we will turn south. Far south. At the Belfort Gap, near the Swiss border, the line is at its quietest. There has been no action there since 1914. Maybe there you will be able to cross back.'

Milly turned and looked at him. What he said made sense, but she caught a glint in his eye. Every move the man made was calculated and she could not believe this wasn't part of some larger plan.

'What will you do down there?' she asked.

'I am on the run too. I have some friends in the Black Forest who will hide me.'

'Just answer me this. Do you feel at home here?'

Von Heket was a little surprised by the question. 'What in Belgium?'

'No. War. All this chaos and killing. Has it become so familiar to you that you cannot imagine what you would do when peace comes?'

He studied her carefully. ‘I crave an end to this insanity. I want a world where Man’s arrogance cannot lay waste to whole countries.’

For a moment it looked as though he was going to say more, but then he stopped and just waited.

She weighed her choices. ‘I will think about it. Meanwhile hand me that first aid box. I can’t stand watching you bleed anymore.’

Once he was tightly bandaged, Von Heket offered to drive. He knew the way and was in a much better position to cope with any questions along the way.

She settled into the back seat and pulled some furs over her. For a while she watched the endless sea of fields roll by as she tried to keep her eyes open, but soon she drifted off into a deep sleep.

When she awoke she found herself lying down on the back seat. It was dark outside and the car was stationary. She lifted her head and realized Von Heket was sitting motionless in the front seat with the courtesy lights on.

‘What is happening?’ she said nervously.

He lifted his finger to his lips. ‘Shh! We are being watched. You slept well. We have just reached the Black Forest. Reichenback I believe.’

‘Why have you stopped? Are you meeting your friends here?’

‘Yes. Yes I am. Stay in the car a minute.’

Von Heket got out.

As she watched him he pulled out a small bottle from his pocket and dabbed its contents on his face and hands like an aftershave. She waited but could see nothing except the captain next to the car and some distant outlines of trees. She listened and noticed that, even though it was night-time, there were a lot of bird calls. Strange whistling chatter like nothing she had heard before.

She cupped her hands against the glass and stared into the darkness. About twenty feet away was a tall stump and behind that an old stand of conifers.

Then the stump moved.

Milly shot backwards. She looked round and saw Von Heket was no longer by the car.

She heard footsteps. Someone else was out there with the Captain.

'Ich habe dich vermisst,' she heard him say.

Someone landed on the roof of the car.

Milly scrabbled among Burloff's possessions to find a weapon.

The man on the roof jumped down to her right and she turned to catch a glimpse of him. He was looking through the window at her. Only it wasn't a man at all. It was the most terrifyingly evil face she had ever seen; sharp teeth, long nose and dark eyes with yellow rims.

She screamed as loudly as her lungs would let her. Wildly she seized a pistol and fired, but it was not loaded. The face disappeared and Von Heket opened the driver's door.

'Miss Summerlee. Whatever is the matter?'

'What was that!?'

'I am glad you asked because I have had a bit of a rethink about that. Originally we followed the usual rules of binominal nomenclature and gave them a name. Professor Challenger was a traditionalist and called them Teryx challengerensis. A bit vain don't you think?'

He drew closer with a wicked glint in his eye. 'But then I thought, no! The labelling of things was just another example of Man's attempt at dominion over Nature. How dare we?! They have not

survived on earth just because Man has let them. They were here before us and will last beyond us. They will have no name!'

Milly's heart was hammering in her chest, her mind racing to catch up. 'Let me out of here!'

Von Heket shrugged and opened the back door. She jumped out and started to scramble away from the car. Then she froze. All around her she could hear the whistling chatter. Dark shapes swept past just out of sight.

'Will those things out there harm me?' she shouted at Von Heket.

'Actually you would be dead already if you had not smelt so much of megalosaurus shit. Now, as ever, the choice is yours. I have to continue down to Emmendingen. It isn't far, just a few miles. You can come with me or take your chances in the wood.'

Slowly she backed towards the car. 'I should have left you to die in Longpre.'

A strange smile crept across his face. 'Oh no, Millicent. May I call you that? Such a pretty name I think. If you have inherited any of your father's scientific curiosity, I am about to show you something that will amaze you.'

Milly jumped back into the car and slammed the door.

Von Heket climbed into the driving seat. 'Excellent decision. If ever you get to know these magnificent animals as I do, I am sure you will learn to appreciate them. These ones here are part of a pilot scheme I have been running.'

'I am not interested. Just get me out of here.'

As they got moving again the grey light of dawn started to creep into the dark forest. The road wound between steeply wooded hills cloaked in a rising mist. Milly studied her driver. How could she have been so wrong about him? She thought she had spotted some good in him, a strong sense of right and wrong. But she had been fooled

by his concern for the animals and hatred for Burloff. As she watched his set features she realised those were just incidental to a deeper drive; an obsession that detached him from the world. She had been right that he was dedicated to his animals, but hadn't realised that meant he cared so little for his fellow humans.

They passed through a small village but there was no sign of life. In the next village doors lay open, carts upturned and possessions strewn by the road. It looked like the place had been abandoned in a hurry. They drove on and other villages were the same.

The car pulled into a small town called Emmendingen. It was deserted like the others but, as they passed through the market square, she noticed several bundles of clothes lying on the cobbles. Von Heket drove straight over them, the car lurching as its tyres met resistance and that was when she realised they were partially consumed bodies. Yet she wasn't shocked – the real monster wasn't out there.

The road out of Emmendingen was new and soon they started to climb a steep hill. Ahead loomed the ruins of a large castle. As they got closer Milly could see that there had been extensive remodelling of the old structure. Layers of old curtain walls had been added to with tall wooden stockades. Some were connected by high walkways and topped by lookout towers.

Von Heket shouted to Milly from the front. 'Welcome to Castle Hochburg, Millicent. I built this research facility from scratch. I designed every part of it, down to the last beam.' He slowed as the road began to wind amongst the massive timber walls, and as they progressed he started pointing out details, like side roads for food delivery and waste removal.

Eventually they came to a large metal gate built into the red, stone walls of the ruin. Von Heket stopped by a wooden cabinet and, leaning out of the window, he picked up a phone from within.

The gates opened and the car continued to climb between high stone ramparts. He stopped where the road widened slightly, got out and opened her door.

‘Come this way,’ he said pointing to a low archway in the wall.

He led her up some stone stairs, through a tunnel, and out into an open area that must have once been the castle keep.

Milly looked around. Several new wooden buildings had been added against the tall walls of the old ruin. It had the feel of a smart new facility but spoilt by the pungent smell of rotting flesh that filled the air.

Two men dressed in red uniforms approached him. They were clearly worried about something, but Von Heket cut them short and issued a series of short instructions.

For a moment the men looked at each other but that only made him shout at them.

He turned back to her. ‘Problems, problems. Right! Are you curious yet? Let me show you what this facility contains. Follow me.’

He did not seem to expect further conversation and she did not want to give anything away.

They walked to one of the larger buildings that had been built against the old keep. He opened a heavy wooden door to a room with an arched window at the far end. The view was breath-taking. In the distance a rolling sea of densely wooded hills seemed to stretch on forever, but that wasn’t what he wanted to show her.

From above, the stockade walls made more sense. They were a series of terraced pens stacking up the side of the slope. Each was about fifty yards across and they stretched round the hill in both directions.

Every pen was crawling with black-feathered creatures like the one Milly had seen in the forest. There had to be thousands and

thousands of them.

Milly could not help looking shocked. The site was terrifying, not least because she had no idea why he had bred so many beasts.

‘You can say it,’ said Von Heket. ‘You are impressed, aren’t you?’

‘What the hell are you doing here?’

‘Didn’t you ever wonder why General Ludendorff himself pardoned me? This is our Plan B.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The *Empress of the Wind* was not at all as elegant or swift as her name suggested. She was in fact a rusting hulk, trundling through her twilight years before a well-earned visit to the scrap yard, hauling iron ore across the oceans. It had been the only vessel slated to cross the Atlantic when they arrived in Para so they had had no choice.

Thomas had tried every method possible to get her captain to make it go faster. He had cajoled, begged, threatened and even bribed, but still she could only manage a stately eleven knots. Although he had sent a telegram to Creed in Para he had had no time to wait for a reply. The ship had no wireless equipment aboard and, as a consequence, during the slow Atlantic crossing, he had no idea what was happening in Europe.

With Roberts confined to her cabin and sleeping most of the time he found himself seeking out Gregory for company. This was not an altogether satisfactory option. The Captain was never a great conversationalist and spent his time exercising to build his strength back up. However, since he owed Thomas his life, he was at least polite.

Four days from Para and Thomas was trying to doze in a canvass chair whilst Gregory finished a hundred press-ups. Dressed in just shorts, Thomas could see his first impression of the Captain had been correct. The man oozed power. His compact, muscular body was crisscrossed with scars, at least two of which were clearly bullet wounds. Three livid lines down his rib cage marked his encounter with the teryx.

'You miss his Lordship?' he suddenly offered.

'Yes.'

‘I used to know men like him in Bengal. They did not suit retirement. Usually turned to drink and gambling.’

Thomas sensed his opportunity. ‘Did you and Freya grow up together?’

Gregory picked up a dumbbell and did not reply for a while. Then, ‘We had a home in the hills just outside Chittagong. My father was Scottish and mother German, but they died of malaria when I was ten and Freya was only two.’ He smiled. ‘She was a bloody tough one from the start. When she was seven a cobra killed our house cat. Two days later she appeared at the back door with a machete in one hand and the cobra’s head in the other.’

He went on lifting the bell.

‘How did you both end up working for Creed?’ asked Thomas.

‘I signed up for the Indian Army when war broke out and fought at Ypres. I was noticed I suppose. Report said I had an aptitude for killing. Had a lot to prove as a poor white boy from the Chittagong, especially one with a German mother. Freya ploughed her own furrow as always. After I left Bengal she travelled to London. She always knew her way round jungles, whether in Bengal or the London social scene. She soon met Creed. He spotted her potential and recruited her.’

Thomas frowned. ‘So you volunteered for this mission to protect her.’

He laughed. ‘Freya needs no protection. No, we both wanted to know what happened to our younger brother, Will.’

Thomas remained silent, willing Gregory to continue.

‘He had come across with Freya and also joined Section 6. He spoke fluent German and Creed assigned him to investigate these creature sightings behind enemy lines. But he disappeared on a mission in the Black Forest.’

Thomas sat up. ‘That is why you wanted more resources spent in Germany. So why did you come to the Amazon?’

‘Intelligence from Germany had drawn a blank. Creed thought the plateau might provide answers. But he also knew about Will and if he felt we were distracted by it, it would have been back to the trenches for me and Bengal for Freya. He was testing us.’

‘You know, Roxton thought it was a suicide mission. He thought Creed was just trying to get rid of us all.’

Gregory did not respond.

Thomas sensed he had hit a nerve. The big man looked uncomfortable.

‘What exactly was your brother investigating?’

Gregory dropped the bell and stood. Thomas realised he had pushed too far.

‘I answered your question, Doctor. When we get back Creed will have you back in your box and us running around doing his bloody dirty work. He will never admit he was wrong and he will want you to know as little as possible.

He sat down and started wiping himself with a towel. ‘My turn now. Why did you sacrifice so much to clear your father’s name? He was mad as a hat and not a pleasant man by all accounts. What’s more, nobody cares any more. Yet you have been to prison, lost your girlfriend and, thanks to Creed, been labelled a conchie.’

‘It’s just wrong. Whatever my father’s faults, and I admit there were many, you cannot ignore the truth because it is inconvenient and you have other priorities. Creed is just as bad. He doesn’t want to be proved wrong, so he is trying to deal with this on the quiet. The whole world needs to know.’

‘Look,’ said the Captain. ‘I promised you we will get to the bottom of this teryx business. But Creed will not let you “tell the world”.

Meanwhile, if I were you, I would worry more about your ex-fiancée near Amiens.'

'Why? What do you know?'

'When we left the Germans were throwing everything at that point in the line and the creature sightings were growing by the day.'

'But she is miles from the Front.'

Gregory just shrugged and, without saying anything, else jogged off down the deck, leaving Thomas with yet more things to worry about. He got little more of significance out of him the rest of the trip.

After two weeks of the most frustrating journey of his life, Thomas stood impatiently on the prow as the *Empress* manoeuvred past all the military vessels anchored in Southampton Water.

Roberts joined him and Gregory on deck. The crossing had given her time to recover and the colour had returned to her cheeks. Her eyes were as bright and quick as before. Thomas remembered how small and light she was when he picked her up and had a strong desire to hold her in his arms again. But after all he heard from Gregory and Roxton, he realised he was still underestimating her.

Ahead lay the forest of masts and cranes that was the busy docks. As they inched towards the quay he stood ready to be the first off but, just as the gang plank was secured, an orderly ran on to the boat.

He approached Thomas. 'I have a message for Captain Gregory, Sir.'

Thomas pointed to Gregory.

The orderly saluted. 'Sir, I have a message from a Major Creed.' Gregory nodded but the young man paused.

'Well, what are you waiting for?' asked Gregory.

‘I was told to be discreet in my communication, Sir’

‘Bugger that. These two have been on the same mission as I have, and I can see no reason why they should not hear it too. Besides, we have vital information for the War Office and don’t want to be standing around on this sodding tub any longer than necessary.’

‘Yes, Sir! The Major communicated to me on the telephone that I should relay to you these precise words. Dinosaur attack on Western front defeated. Stop. Germans suing for peace. Stop’

Thomas felt his mouth drop open.

‘What?!’ said Roberts.

‘Repeat that slowly, man, and please make sure you have every bloody word correct,’ said Gregory. As the orderly repeated himself word for word, Thomas’s mind reeled.

‘Are you trying to say the war is over?’

‘Well, almost. The ceasefire was announced yesterday. Major Creed will meet you at his offices in Admiralty Arch tomorrow at two o’clock.’

‘Tomorrow!’ said Thomas. ‘We come back with news of an impending dinosaur apocalypse and bloody Major Creed will get around to us tomorrow!’ He looked at the others, but noticed no one else seemed quite so indignant.

Gregory smiled. ‘Calm down, Challenger.’

‘Calm down! The world needs to know what is happening in the Amazon.’

‘You seem to have missed the most important part of the message. There is a ceasefire. I am sorry, but the news that this bloody war might finally be over is what I have been waiting to hear for years. No war, no dinosaur threat.’

‘And what about your brother?’

Roberts glanced at Gregory and his face darkened. ‘With peace we will have a better chance of finding him. Now bloody relax and enjoy the good news.’

‘Did Creed receive our telegram?’ Thomas asked the orderly.

‘Yes.’

‘And …’

‘He read it, I am sure.’

‘What was his response?’ The orderly’s mouth opened and shut but no noise came out.

‘Arghh!’ Thomas had not even set foot on British soil and already he felt he was dancing to Creed’s tune.

Later that day they all caught the boat train to London. As the train trundled through the Home Counties, Thomas watched the tidy towns, farms and fields slip by and wondered how they would cope with teryx haunting the woods and hedgerows. As more passengers got on Thomas picked up the air of excitement. People were travelling into central London anticipating celebration. Talk was of a German defeat and a failed ‘super weapon’.

During the journey neither Roberts or Gregory said anything to Thomas. Roberts chatted politely to other passengers as if she had just been away to the south coast for the weekend. Thomas began to appreciate what a gifted actress she was.

As they drew into Waterloo he said. ‘So is your surname Roberts or Gregory?’

She stalled for moment and then lent forward to hold his hand. ‘Roberts is my married name.’ She registered the surprise in his face and continued, ‘He was a wonderful man, but died at the Somme.’

She stood and kissed him on the forehead. ‘I won’t see you tomorrow, but I am sure we will meet again.’ Then she was gone.

Thomas was crushed. There was so much he wanted to ask her but her indifference spoke volumes. She was Creed’s woman through and through and, as Roxton had warned him, you could never trust a spy.

Gregory also took his hand and shook it firmly. ‘You were right and no one can take that away from you, but remember this is not about reputations. See you tomorrow and work out what it is you most want out of Creed.’

After they had gone Thomas decided that what he most wanted was to find out was what had become of Milly. He disembarked and hurried off to Warrington Crescent.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

All night and all day the sinister chatter of the teryx drifted up from their pens. It was like the murmur of a distant mob and, with it, their rank smell seemed to penetrate everything in Milly's room, even the floor and walls.

From the moment she arrived at Castle Hochburg, Von Heket had kept her imprisoned in a secure but well-furnished hut above the main pens. There was only one high window from which it was difficult to see much, other than the passing of the days.

At first, Milly found herself treated quite well by her captors. A young orderly would bring her hot food from the canteen three times a day and she had a small bathroom where new clothes were laid out for her. However, she remembered Von Heket's comments about the megalosaurus scent she carried and she chose to remain in her own clothes even though they were filthy.

Von Heket would visit her promptly at six o'clock every evening and talk about his vision of a world without war. She would listen quietly, nodding in the right places, and desperately trying to work out how she could escape.

Although he talked endlessly about what was wrong with the world of men, he never was very specific about how he hoped to change it. He also described how much he admired the qualities of the teryx, but never what he planned to do with them. He also seemed keen to emphasise how indebted he was to her father and Professor Challenger. Indeed, to Challenger he seemed to attribute some disturbing epiphany he had on the plateau.

Milly knew better than to be too curious. She believed the man to be dangerously unhinged, but felt by withholding her interest she at least had some power in the relationship. He didn't need her approval but, despite himself, he craved her admiration.

Every night she tried to sleep, soaked in the smell and sound of the teryx, but it was almost impossible.

Then things started to change.

First the hot meals ceased and Von Heket stopped visiting regularly. The odd occasion he turned up he brought her cold food. He started to look more dishevelled and became distracted, sometimes sitting for long periods not saying anything.

One evening after a meal of bread and cheese he said quietly; 'Do I have the right?'

Doubt? thought Milly. She watched him closely but did not respond.

'There is no going back,' he continued. 'You understand don't you. The prize will justify what comes before.' He fixed her with his dark eyes.

'I cannot condone what I do not know,' she said carefully.

Frustration twisted his face. 'But I have told you of my vision!'

'But at what cost?'

'Damn you!' he said petulantly and stormed out.

Just before dawn the next day she started to hear shouting and arguments. She sat on the edge of her bed straining to understand their significance. At one point there was the sound of a car leaving.

Light came but she heard no more. The day dragged by but Von Heket didn't return. Around mid-afternoon there was the sound of commotion from the pens. There were more shouts and screams. Shots rang out and then it was quiet again.

Milly clambered up to the window and tried to look out the side just to catch a glimpse of what was going on. When this didn't work she started screaming, but her cries just drifted out, unanswered, across

the forest. She paced, she raged, she wept but still no one came. Eventually, she fell asleep.

When she woke it was with a start. It was pitch black in her room but there was a flickering light coming from beneath the door. She shouted out and the bolts were pulled back.

The door opened and Von Heket was standing there. Gone was the buttoned up German officer. He was bare-chested, wearing just heavy shoes and canvass trousers held up by a leather belt from which hung several small black bottles. He had lost his head bandage revealing the livid new scar across his temple. His torso was smeared with something brown and sticky. In one hand he was holding a burning torch.

She stood slowly as he hung up the torch and walked towards her. As he got close she was swamped by the musky stench he was giving off. He wrapped her in his arms and pressed his body against hers. She did not resist.

'Millicent,' he whispered. 'You are privileged to witness history. I am about to change the world.'

She waited for his lips to close on hers and felt his tongue in her mouth. Then she bit down hard.

Von Heket launched her across the room, smashing her into the opposite wall.

Winded, she lay still expecting an assault to follow but, instead, he wiped his mouth and laughed.

'How disappointing,' he said as he checked his tongue for blood. 'Despite your father, you are just a small minded fool like the rest of them.' He picked up the torch

'You revolt me Von Heket. You had better kill me now because otherwise, the first chance I get …'

‘Pathetic, truly pathetic. Well, if you want to kill me you will have to leave this room first and, as before, I will give you a choice. Stick with me or take your chances.’ He turned and walked out, leaving the door open.

Milly had nothing to lose, so got up and followed him. There didn’t seem to be any electric lights on in the compound and she stumbled behind him as she tried to keep in the pool of light thrown by the torch. All the time she was searching for something she could use as a weapon.

Von Heket crossed the courtyard and led her back down the stone stairs to where he had parked the car.

Suddenly Von Heket froze and Milly did the same.

Very gradually he reached into his pocket and pulled out a small bird whistle.

Milly peered into the darkness and realised one of the foul creatures was standing right in front of them. She moved closer to Von Heket, putting him between her and the monster.

It stepped forward. This one was larger than most, its head carrying two large fleshy black crests, like a demonic cockerel. It bent its head down and dropped something at his feet. It was a severed hand.

Von Heket issued a burst of chattering whistles, just like the teryx, until the animal backed off and disappeared into the darkness.

He bent down and picked up the hand. ‘A gift,’ he said with a grotesque pride. ‘That is one of the oldest females.’

Milly shivered. She felt sick to her core. For the moment she would have to stay close.

‘They are hungry and we have no more food.’ He headed off up some stairs.

Milly struggled to keep up as her legs ached and she felt dizzy with the terror. They started walking along one of the parapets she had seen from the upper window. Rising up from the dark pens below came the smell of rotting meat.

Von Heket stopped. ‘Hold this.’

He passed her the torch and then started to turn a large, well-oiled handle. There was a creaking of timber and the noise from the creatures began to increase.

Milly noticed a gap in the parapet ahead appear. He was opening a gate in the stockade.

Sounds of a fight broke out as the two pen groups merged for the first time. Barks and screeches began to fill the night air.

Von Heket turned back to Milly and took the torch off her before heading away down another parapet. Soon he was opening another gate. One by one he was combining all the pens. As he arrived at the outer wall of the stockade – the last gate – Milly realised in horror what he was doing.

‘You can’t just let them all go free! There must be thousands of them.’

‘Take the torch,’ he said putting the whistle in his mouth.

‘No. I will not help you with this.’

‘I can do it now, with or without your help.’

‘That village we went through was destroyed by your animals. Why would you want more people to die? You are mad. If you can’t feed them we must burn them in their pens.’

He blew a few blasts on his whistle and moved towards her. She grabbed the torch in both hands and levelled it at Von Heket.

‘Come nearer and I will knock you into the pen. I am sure your hungry friends will enjoy that.’

‘Oh, Millicent. You will never fully appreciate the control I have over these animals.’

Milly felt the parapet move and Von Heket backed away. ‘They would no more eat me than a parent.’

She felt a warm breeze on the back of her neck ‘Is there one behind me?’ she whispered.

Once again Von Heket raised the whistle to his lips. Milly had a second to think. She flung herself down onto the parapet and swung the torch round shoving it up into the body of her attacker. For a moment the vile creature was lit up above her; arms outstretched and mouth open. But she had buried the torch into its thick neck feathers, which instantly caught alight. Instead of descending on her and ripping her open it leapt back, screeching in fear and pain, before jumping off the parapet into the darkness.

Von Heket snatched the torch from her hand and put his foot on her throat. ‘Bravo! You were wise not to change your stinking clothes, that megalosaurus scent saved you again. Now, watch as I finish what I set out to do five years ago.’

‘All these governments, generals, politicians and kings think they can win this war, but there will be only one winner to emerge from this man-made chaos. Ludendorff thinks he is being clever, but I have fooled him too. There is no whistle to call my beauties back. Man’s misrule is coming to an end and you, Millicent Summerlee, are about to witness it. This is in honour of your father. This is the birth of a new Eden!’

He took his foot off her and slowly he began to open the last gate. The noise in the pens grew to a barking, screeching clamour.

Milly pulled herself up to look over the stockade. In the thin predawn light she could see the silhouette of Von Heket cranking the gate

open. Below, a single dark shadow slipped out from the stockade and floated down the steep hill towards the trees. Then another and another, until a black tide of monsters had spread out over the slopes and drained into the surrounding forest. She slumped back down onto the parapet.

Von Heket turned back to her, his eyes wild with excitement. 'Never forget, never forget. You were here when it started. Farewell and good luck, you will need it.'

Then he was gone and she was alone.

Milly hugged her knees and waited for death but no creature came. Dawn turned into day and the compound remained silent. Abandoned and lost somewhere in the Black Forest her mind searched for something. For hope of any kind in what seemed a hopeless situation. All she had wanted was to help people and yet she had just witnessed good people die and evil thrive. What was the point in fighting so hard to stay alive in a world as wicked as this?

'I am so sorry Tom,' she said aloud. 'How could I have imagined all this?'

She had never believed him and nobody else had cared. But now she had borne witness to his worst nightmares. Maybe she owed it to him to tell others what she had seen. And if Von Heket was going to drag her father's name into all this madness she had to be there to defend him.

She got to her feet and looked about. One thing she was sure of, if she was to die she did not want it to be by the teeth and claws of one of those vile creatures.

Von Heket was gone and the pens were empty, though their stench remained. It was early morning but it was already hot as she staggered back towards the castle. She reached the stairs by the

iron gate and, somewhere in the forest, she heard a screech. She decided to hurry up to the high courtyard for safety.

Cautiously she worked her way round the wooden buildings inside the old castle walls. They all looked like they were abandoned in a hurry. The beds were unmade, food still sat in the hall and the well-equipped armoury was unlocked. Milly began to wonder why Von Heket would leave all this to her unless, like his animals, he had no plan to return.

She stood for a moment and tried to think clearly. She needed to find out what was going on. She resolved to search the castle from top to bottom, maybe there was something there that would give her an advantage next time she met Von Heket. She picked up a Luger from the armoury, chambered a round and then went to the refectory and ate a large lunch of cheese and stale bread washed down with pear juice.

That afternoon she spent searching each building thoroughly. Just below the kitchens she noticed a long, low construction separated from the rest. She went to its door, which was metal, and was faintly irritated that someone had taken the trouble to lock this. The windows were barred, but she could see there was some sort of laboratory inside. She hurried back to the armoury and picked up two stick grenades and some tape. She strapped these to the lab door, tugged the pull cords and ran round the side of the hut. The explosions shattered the stillness of the castle.

She waited for a moment and then ran back round to the front of the hut. Before she could even look at her handiwork she caught the movement of a black shape in the corner of her eye. She threw herself against the wall and pulled the Luger out of her pocket. The teryx moved so fast she wondered whether she had actually seen it.

White smoke drifted across the yard from the hand grenades and obscured her view. Desperately she strained to see through it. Between two thicker patches she caught sight of the teryx crossing

between two buildings. She fired but it was long gone before the bullet even arrived where she had aimed it.

With a shock she realized that not only was her aim not good enough, but it was moving so fast her reaction times were far too slow. She had to get to cover.

She edged along the wall to get to the doors she had blown. But when she got there she found the grenades had not done the job. The doors were bent, but still would not let her in.

Ahead or her the smoke had cleared and she saw the black teryx about thirty feet away, on the rise of the hill, looking at her.

Its body shifted from side to side as its head held perfectly still. Slowly it raised its feathered arms preparing to attack. This was the first time she had seen one in the light and, intimidating though the sight was, the sun stripped some of the nightmare from it. It was just a predator hunting, and this one looked like a sub adult at that. She had heard every story there was about how to cope with these situations sitting at her father's dinner table. Now all she had to do was remember.

'Go! I am not frightened of you! Go!' she shouted. She lifted her hands in the air and waved them.

The teryx tilted its head but did not move.

She took a step forward and shouted louder. All those big game hunters told stories of staring predators in the eye and facing them down. She was sure she was doing it right, but then the teryx launched itself at her.

She aimed the pistol as best she could and managed to squeeze off three shots before the animal reached her, the impact throwing her to the ground.

Quickly she rolled to one side, expecting the killer to leap on her back. But, when she looked up, it was still.

‘Those bloody big game hunters talked shit!’ she shouted at no one.

She had hit it only once, but it was enough: the bullet had blown a hole in its skull. A lucky shot, but she no longer cared. It was time she had some luck.

She stood up slowly, keeping an eye on the corpse while trying to check for other black figures. The smoke had cleared and the silence had returned. There was no other sign of life in the castle.

At that moment it dawned on Milly just how vulnerable she was out in the open. Her next shots might not be so lucky.

She ran across the courtyard into the large viewing room where Von Heket had first shown her the Hochburg pens. She slammed the massive door shut behind her and locked it. Silence again and, at last, a sense of safety

Drifting up from the valley below came the sound of an engine. She moved to the large window and saw a truck labouring its way up the hill towards the castle. Directly below, in the dark shadows of the pens, she could see movement. Several teryx must have returned, looking for food.

As the truck wound closer she realised it was carrying troops. She had to warn them they were driving into an ambush, but running down there would mean certain death.

The truck pulled up between the narrow ramparts inside the metal gates. Men started to jump out the back. They looked like Germans, but most had their jackets off after the long journey and must have left their weapons in the lorry.

Movement on the parapets caught her eye. Scampering, leaping and floating along the top of the stockades came the creatures. She started to hammer on the window and shout but they could not hear her.

Just as the men were beginning to line up, black death swept down from the pen walls.

Milly stepped back from the window. She could not watch. Shouts and screams followed her as she backed into the corner of her room and sat down hugging her knees.

Someone started revving the truck's engine, shoving it into reverse. It got moving but then there was a loud smash and the engine cut. After three or four minutes there was silence from below. From where she sat she could see black smoke begin to rise into the sky.

Milly stayed in the room until she was sure the teryx had finished. She guessed the soldiers had been sent to find Von Heket, but they had been too late.

Gradually she found herself tuning in to the sound of the teryx. The odd click, so quiet you could mistake it for floorboards settling or a sound like a gust of wind. At one point she became convinced there was one right outside the door to her room, but there was no sound. She held her breath and concentrated. Then came a gentle clicking as it moved off.

Time passed very slowly and sunlight in the room turned orange and faded. She lay down on a couch knowing she was safe to sleep, but she was not going to be trapped in a room again. She was in a castle and castles were built to be defended. The next morning she would start making the place impregnable.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Thomas arrived early for his meeting with Creed at Admiralty Arch and was shown through to a large, bright suite overlooking the Mall.

The sun was out and the view through two giant sash windows down to the Palace was magnificent. The newly widened avenue swept away south-west between lines of young, fresh-leaved plane trees.

Thomas paced up and down in front of the windows, ignoring the sight. The night before he had rushed round to Milly's house, but it was boarded up and there was no sign of her, Simpson or anyone. It was impossible to find out whether she had been caught up in the fighting round Amiens or not. Worry, and a deep sense of guilt, had kept him up all night.

By the time two o'clock came round he was desperate for some answers. Right on time Gregory appeared.

'Where is Creed then?' fumed Thomas. 'I bet he is just making a point.'

Gregory had returned to his old self and seemed supremely indifferent to Thomas' concerns.

Creed arrived forty-five minutes late. He was immaculately dressed in a black suit and powder blue tie. Behind him came what Thomas took to be a bodyguard. He was a huge soldier, dressed as a Captain, with an impossibly damaged face and his arm in a cast. He looked like he had survived a terrible physical ordeal, several times. He hovered uncomfortably by the door.

'Gentlemen, I am sorry I was late,' said Creed. 'The First Sea Lord does go on. Now, let me first say you have done your country proud. Despite enormous challenges and the tragic loss of so many colleagues you have completed your mission. I was particularly sad to hear of the death of Lord Roxton. He was a great servant to his country.'

'Pah!" said Thomas. 'I don't believe for one minute you care. For all you knew it was a suicide mission.'

Creed seemed surprised by Thomas' angry tone. 'You know nothing of military matters, Dr Challenger. I would be careful what you say.'

The man by the door shifted uncomfortably as Thomas answered back. 'It wasn't my opinion. Lord Roxton …'

'May I introduce Captain Edward Malone,' said Creed, stopping Thomas mid- sentence.

For a moment there was silence. Malone stepped forward and held out his hand.

'Dr Challenger. We have met before, but you were younger and I was a little less… damaged.'

Creed had outplayed Thomas again. Suddenly the thought of complaining that Lord Roxton's life had been thrown away by Creed, in front of Malone, seemed cruel.

'Mr .. Captain … I am astonished to see you again. Everyone thought you fell at the Somme,' said Thomas taking his hand. 'Lord Roxton missed you so very much. If only he had known before he died…'

Malone shook his head. 'Did he die well? Was it a great adventure?'

'The best. He played the game and he won, Captain.'

'I am sorry to hurry things along,' said Creed quickly. 'But a lot has happened since you left. Technically we are still at war and the Germans still have hundreds of prehistoric creatures. But the truth of it is that society is breaking down within the German Empire, and, after the disaster at Longpre, which I am sure you have all read about, they have abandoned their Biowaffen Project.'

'I must admit when they took Amiens and I had heard nothing from you I was beginning to panic. But they did their worst and the whole project turned out to be … well, a bit of a paper tiger.'

'You see, just before they unleashed the full force of their dinosaur hordes, Captain Malone here returned from the grave and landed a

Sopwith Pup near Abberville. He was carrying an example of the box that was being used to control these creatures and it took no time for our boffins to work out how to block that signal. The result was chaos and victory for us!'

'Are you sure that is the end of it, Creed?' Thomas asked. 'From what we saw, I can't believe these creatures just rolled over and died.'

Creed smiled tightly. 'Major, that's *Major* Creed. Well, here's the best bit. Many of the German generals hated the Biowaffen Unit. They never thought it was a good idea. So, the moment everything went wrong, they closed down the whole programme. There is another facility at Aachen and they have promised to destroy the animals themselves as part of the peace agreement.'

Thomas was stunned. 'Can't they at least return them to the plateau?'

'Oh, no. Can you imagine the cost? Germany is bankrupt. Besides the animals have those neural clamps stuck in their brains. No, the best thing is to put them down. Better for them. Better for everyone.'

Creed radiated complacency, but Thomas pressed on. 'Major, you haven't actually asked us what we found out in the plateau.'

He pulled his father's notebook out of his jacket. 'As I am sure you already know my father did make it back there. What he recorded and we witnessed for ourselves should make you very concerned.'

Creed sighed. 'Yes, yes, I know all about your 'teryx'. In fact I have been completely briefed on your expedition and Corporal Roberts communicated her analysis of that diary. He really was a colourful man your father. You should be proud.'

'And so? What are you going to do?'

‘We will of course keep an eye out for these creatures but, under the terms of the ceasefire, these *teryx* are an internal affair for the Germans.´

‘Do you even know where the teryx are being kept?’

‘I understand your concerns and we will address them in due course. But things are politically delicate at the moment. In a few days I will be attending a peace conference near Belfort and I am not about to accuse them of lying over this Biowaffen nonsense.’

‘Have they handed over Kurt Von Heket?’

Creed paused. ‘No. But when they catch him – and I am assured they will - they have promised to court-marshal him and he will be shot.’

‘I would like your permission to go to Longpre and Amiens to inspect the carcasses. I can then confirm if there are any teryx amongst them.’

Creed shook his head. ‘Nice try Dr Challenger, but I am well aware of your desire to find out what happened to a certain nurse. Miss Milly Summerlee I believe? Captain Malone, would you like to describe how you managed to obtain the controller box?’

Malone told the story of how he met Milly near Villers-Bretonneux and she led them to the box, but ultimately how he had to leave her behind.

Thomas was crumpled into a seat. For a moment he would not believe what he was being told. It had to be another Creed trick. But Malone’s was not one to play games and his account chilled Thomas to the bone.

‘Oh God. Oh my God. You mean you abandoned her to the mercy of some ghastly creature in the middle of an airfield?’

Malone was emotionless. ‘She made it to the farmhouse. It had to be done and, as was proved, I made the right decision.’

‘Like it was the right decision to slaughter all the ape-men on the plateau!’

Gregory spoke up from the corner. ‘Now steady on, Doctor. Without that control box he brought back our boys would have been overwhelmed and we would be the ones suing for peace. Malone did what he had to do and, if Miss Summerlee didn’t survive, then she died a heroine.’

Thomas could hold it in no longer. ‘Damn you all. She’s not dead! You just abandoned her. What is more, I guarantee Von Heket is, at this very moment, planning an attack with his teryx. Meanwhile you are sitting smugly here, congratulating yourselves and planning to do nothing!’

Creed looked at Thomas with mild sympathy. ‘We have all lost loved ones. But do listen to yourself. We will sign a peace treaty with the Germans, on the American terms. The war will be over. The killing will stop, and once there is free movement between our countries all these things can be investigated properly.’

‘Captain Gregory?’ pleaded Thomas. ‘You understand. You saw them in action. Are you going to just accept this?’

Gregory would not meet his eyes. A devastating silence gave Thomas his answer.

Creed clapped his hands. ‘Now I must get back. I would just like to repeat that I am extremely grateful for the sacrifices you made to find out what the Germans had been up to on the plateau and your contributions will be recognised. Having said that, may I also remind you that everything you discovered must remain secret under the Official Secrets Act. Now, and for the time being, good day. Captain Gregory?’

So saying Creed hurried out of the room and Gregory followed.

Thomas ran his fingers through his hair.

‘I am truly sorry, Thomas,’ said Malone. ‘I know you will blame me for her death, but I stand by my decision. I only hope you can forgive me.’

Thomas looked at Malone. It was almost impossible to imagine the pain that he must have been through to end up as damaged as he was.

‘Captain Malone, I am in no position to hold you to account. If I had seen or experienced half the things you have I am sure I would have done the same. No, it is my fault. I should have moved heaven and earth to stop her returning to the Front and I did not. I ran off to the Amazon on what now seems to have been an almost irrelevant expedition.’

He thought for a moment. ‘What I cannot accept is that, if there is the tiniest chance that she has survived, I would abandon her again. I know what I must do.’

So saying he shook Malone warmly by the hand and left.

Outside London pressed in around him: busy, smelly and loud. Everywhere there were signs of celebration. It was lunchtime and all the pubs were full. He took a deep breath and headed across Trafalgar Square with a sense of purpose. First to Standfords in Long Acre for maps, then Charing Cross for timetables. After half an hour he found himself with a cup of tea and a macaroon in a crowded Lyons Corner House on the Strand studying his purchases.

‘You’re looking in the wrong place if I may say so,’ said a familiar voice.

‘Simpson!’ Thomas leapt up and dropped his macaroon. ‘What are you doing here?’

The Summerlee’s butler sat down opposite him and ordered another tea.

‘I followed you from Admiralty Arch. I know you called at Warrington Crescent. I am sorry I was not able to help you.’

‘I am not giving up on her, Simpson. Have you had any word?’

‘No, but I do have one piece of information. A German officer was taken prisoner when they stormed Amiens prison. Under interrogation he confessed he was in charge of firing squads and, recently, a certain Captain Von Heket was due to be shot, but was pardoned personally by Ludendorff. When he left he took a female prisoner with him. A tall, dark-haired, blue-eyed English woman.’

‘What! She is with Von Heket? Wait, how do *you* know all this?’

At that point Thomas spotted Captain Gregory enter the Corner House.

‘Keep your head down,’ he hissed. ‘One of Creed’s men has just come in. Oh damn, he has seen us.’

He headed straight for the table and Thomas scrabbled to hide his maps.

‘Morning, Monty. Dr Challenger,’ said Gregory.

‘Alec,’ replied Simpson.

Thomas was beginning to feel uneasy. ‘Simpson, I think we had better leave.’

Gregory sat down and popped the rest of Thomas’ macaroon in his mouth. ‘As I have always said, you would make a sodding awful spy, Challenger. Monty here has worked for Creed for bloody years.’

Thomas gathered his papers and stood. ‘If you want to stop me going to France you will have to arrest me. Don’t worry, I will get the bill.’

‘Sit down and listen to what we have to say.’

Thomas remained standing.

‘If you want to find Miss Summerlee and where the teryx are, sit!’

Thomas waivered and then sat down heavily.

Gregory gathered up his newly brought maps and threw them in a bin. He then placed a map of Southern Germany on the table.

‘Major Creed has been a good CO, but, after his success at Longpre, the promise of peace and a place at the big table seems to have gone to his head.’

‘Were you spying on Milly, Simpson?’

‘Certainly not! I was spying on *you*.’

‘Concentrate please,’ said Gregory, ‘I am not going to repeat myself. We have known about the Aachen and Cambrai facilities for some time, but there have always been rumours of a third site. A site the Germans will not admit exists. I believe it is here.’ He pointed to a town in the Black Forest. ‘At a place called Emmendingen. Where my brother, Will, disappeared.’

‘Then tell Creed.’

‘He doesn’t believe there is anything there because the last message we received from Will said he had found nothing.’

‘Then why …?’

‘I don’t believe it was Will who sent it.’

Thomas shook his head. He was angry and confused. He felt like he had been played for a fool. But he also understood that these two men, for whatever reason, were finally telling him the truth. ‘So, let me be clear. You think Von Heket has some teryx in this Emmendingen place and he has taken Milly there? Why?’

Simpson threw Gregory a look and then spoke. ‘We don’t know anything about him other than his name keeps popping up. It is

possibly because Milly is the Professor's daughter and he wants to show off to her. Or the explanation could be a lot more simple…'

Thomas flushed with indignation. 'How dare you suggest that, and you her…her butler! Thank you for the tip off, gentlemen. I will be leaving tonight.'

For the first time Thomas could remember, Gregory laughed. 'You are a funny bugger, Challenger. Freya was right. You've got balls. We'll make a soldier of you yet.'

At the mention of Roberts, Thomas bridled. 'I don't want to be a soldier or a spy or anything like you. I just want to find Milly before that monster Von Heket harms her. I am not going to let her down again.'

Gregory expression hardened. 'Well, whatever you are doing, you are not doing it alone. Creed has dropped the ball. I want to find out what really happened to my brother and I will never forget what those stinking black chickens did to my men in the jungle. So, I will gladly risk a court martial to run down that evil bastard Von Heket and his bloody pets.'

He put his hand on Thomas' shoulder. 'Major Creed does not know we are here, so please understand the risk we are taking. Although we might be able to help with Milly, my mission priority is to find out what they have done with the teryx.'

'You may not think it is a rescue mission, but it isn't about revenge either, Gregory,' warned Thomas. 'Why are you risking so much? Why the hurry? Why aren't you just leaving it to the German authorities to deal with them in due course as your Major seems happy to do?'

'Look at this map,' said Gregory pointing at the front line just above the Swiss border. 'Why did the Germans ask to have a peace conference in the far south? There is Belfort and just fifty miles away …' He drew a line with his finger to Emmendingen.

‘Creed and the cream of the Allied general staff will be marching distance from the mystery third site. And don’t forget, Ludendorff personally freed Von Heket. The Bosch are up to something and we have less than a week before the conference starts to find out what.’

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

The journey down to Belfort was chaos. General Ludendorff himself was representing Germany and had demanded face-to-face negotiations. No one liked the idea but, since the German forces had retreated to the Hindenburg Line and were putting up stiff resistance, they felt compelled. So both Field Marshal Haig and Marshal Foch, with all their advisors and security, had to travel down from Paris.

At Belfort a convoy of cars was to take negotiators to the town of Altkirch, right on the Front Line, in No Man's Land almost, where the talks would actually take place.

All this gave Captain Alec Gregory plenty of opportunity to bring Thomas Challenger with him, masquerading as his adjutant. As part of Creed's team, Gregory could easily bypass security, just as long as they kept out of Creed's way.

The moment they arrived in Belfort they abandoned the political circus and sought out an old colleague of Gregory's whom he had telegraphed from London and warned to expect their arrival. So, three days after the meeting in the Lyons Corner House, Thomas found himself looking for the garage of Arnold Duprey in the back streets of Belfort.

The garage backed onto some wooded hills that were part of the citadel's massive fortifications. They consisted of a series of large sheds beside a small domestic house. The double doors of the biggest were open and inside was a busy repair shop. Gregory went inside to talk to one of the mechanics.

When he came back out he was smiling 'I should have checked my watch.' He looked about and spotted a restaurant about fifty yards down the road. The faint sound of music and chatter could be heard drifting down the street. 'Wait here a minute,' he said.

Gregory disappeared into the restaurant and the noise immediately increased in volume. Thomas waited and waited. It was a full half an

hour before Gregory reappeared, slightly flushed, followed by a very small round man in blue overalls. This was Monsieur Duprey.

'Bienvenu a mon ami Britannique! N'est-ce pas un jour merveilleux?' he said, stuffing a pipe in his mouth and then proceeding to hug Thomas.

'Merci,' said Thomas separating himself. 'Thank you for helping us.'

'Vous etes mes allies et amis de Alec. Rien n'est trop beau. Suivez-moi, j'avoir votre voiture prete.' With that he ambled off into the shed, in a cloud of tobacco smoke and alcohol fumes.

Soon Thomas heard a large engine start up and then the doors of a smaller shed opened. Out rolled a large Mercedes. It was painted a dull military grey and had clearly seen a few years' service. It had a hard cab and the side windows had been replaced with metal plates with crude slits cut in them. The front window was covered in chicken wire.

'He offered me an FT tank,' said Gregory in Thomas's ear, 'but it only does five miles an hour and we need to be rather more subtle.'

Duprey got out of the car. 'Voila!' he said with a flourish.

A woman mechanic in overalls followed the car out, rubbing oil off her face.

'Mercedes Knight four litre, good strong engine, Captain.' It was Corporal Roberts.

'What the bloody hell are you doing here?' said Gregory before Thomas could ask the same.

'Oh, come on, Alec. I could tell what you were thinking from the first debrief. You ought to be more careful. Creed is waiting for us to try and do something about Will. Don't worry, I covered your tracks but it wasn't easy, especially since you have brought Dr Challenger with you. Monty is pretending he has gone to a retreat in Scotland.'

Again Thomas tried to speak, but Gregory cut in. ‘Freya. This is not going to happen.’

‘I am not going to let you stomp around down here by yourself and ruin any chance of finding Will. Your methods aren’t exactly subtle and Milly Summerlee is a distraction.’

‘Now wait a minute …’ Thomas was cut short again by Gregory.

‘This is not about Milly or Will and you know it. You must go back now. That is an order.’

She moved closer to him. ‘And how will you report me if you are disobeying orders in the first place.’

‘You cannot come with us.’

Roberts took a step back and bent her knees slightly. ‘Try and stop me.’

‘I will if I have too,’ said Gregory rolling up his sleeves.

Thomas was dumbfounded. He looked at Dubrey who just smiled and shrugged.’Familles!’

‘For God sake grow up!’ said Thomas. ‘I thought you two were ruthless professionals, but look at you.’

For a moment neither said anything, then Roberts backed off and slowly began to take off her overalls.

Dubrey muttered something in French and looked away, but Gregory held her stare. She dropped her clothes to the floor to be left standing in some very brief underwear.

Thomas blushed and someone inside the garage whistled.

‘You are fucking unbelievable,’ said Gregory. ‘What game are you playing now?’

‘Well, I don’t know about you, but I am getting ready to leave. You’re wasting time arguing, Alec. We need to catch up with that convoy.’

She reached inside the Mercedes and pulled out the khaki uniform of the Women’s Auxillary Corps and started putting it on, before climbing into the back seat.

Thomas turned to Gregory. ‘Just tell me this. Do you think she was sent by Creed?’

Gregory considered the question and then shook his head. ‘No. This is about Will and she would do anything for her brother. It is the one subject on which you can trust her.’

Roberts stuck her head out of the window and grinned. ‘Oh, and don’t worry, Thomas. I have a feeling that, where we find the teryx and Von Heket, we will find your damsel in distress.’

‘Right, enough faffing about,’ said Gregory, ‘we had better get going. Merci, Monsieur Duprey, nous serons de retour demain.’

The Frenchman hugged him one more time and whispered something in his ear. Then he waved extravagantly and teetered back to the restaurant.

Gregory climbed into the driving seat. ‘I am driving. I have memorised the map. We will cross the line near Altkirch and head for the Rhine crossing just beyond Mulhausen, then north to Freiburg and on to Emmendingen. Fifty miles at the most.’

‘What did Duprey say to you?’ asked Thomas.

‘You won’t be surprised to hear there are rumours. They say the wolves have returned to the Black Forest. He knows that is where we are heading and he was telling me to be careful.’

‘If the teryx are already loose in the Forest, I am not sure chicken wire will stop one.’

‘They will have to catch us first, and this Mercedes should do over fifty easily enough.’

He gunned the engine and they headed east out of Belfort in a cloud of dust.

Thomas sat looking out of the small slit in the metal plate beside him. It was a beautiful sunny afternoon. There was a warm blue haze across the forested hills of Sundgau. Next to him on the back seat, Roberts opened a suitcase to reveal several sets of German clothing, two MP 18s with ammunition and three pistols.

‘Heads up,’ said Gregory. Ahead lay a road block and several dozen French soldiers.

‘Do you need me in the front?’ asked Roberts.

‘No. The French line will be no problem,’ said Gregory. ‘My diplomatic pass should work, but after that you might be useful.’

The French soldiers, smiling but nervous, waved them through their lines.

After Ballersdorf, they followed the road along the wide valley, which then dropped down to Altkirch, where a German checkpoint was stopping each car.

Roberts wriggled over into the front seat and put on the same one-dimple smile Thomas had first noticed on the airship journey.

When the soldiers finally got to their car it was clear they were not happy at the modifications Monsieur Duprey had added

Gregory got out to show his papers and started chatting in German. Roberts joined him to stretch and soon was sharing a cigarette with several other soldiers.

Thomas sat nervously in the back, his legs over a suitcase full of submachine guns.

Outside Gregory handed round his hip flask. The soldiers gave him his papers back, but still he laughed and joked with them. After what seemed hours he got back in and made a big deal of ordering a reluctant Roberts back into her seat.

'Why did you take so long?' asked Thomas. 'I was sweating bullets back here.'

'You are right not to want to be a spy, Challenger. Intelligence. That is what that was all about. Those guys back there can't wait for this war to finish, which is why they were happy to let us through. That and my promise of a load more cigarettes and whiskey. Apparently there are riots and shortages everywhere, which explains why Ludendorff and his cronies arrived by plane last night. They have also heard the same rumours about wolves and killers in the forests. In fact, they say Mulhausen has been being evacuated.'

Roberts shook her head. 'This is not good at all. Maybe we should warn Creed?'

'No!' said Thomas.

Gregory was more measured. 'I realise the risk we are taking, but we will need more proof before we go gate crashing an international peace conference. They don't start talking until tomorrow. So, if we can get to Emmendingen and back before dark, we could have what we need before then.'

Gregory ignored the turn to Altkirch and accelerated towards Mulhausen. It wasn't long before the ancient medieval town rose up in front of them and, as the guards had warned them, it was deserted. The Mercedes crept through the cobbled streets, past quiet gabled merchant houses and gothic churches.

'This might be easier than I thought,' muttered Gregory.

They headed east out of town on a long straight road until they crossed the Rhine. In a layby they changed into their German clothes and loaded the submachine guns.

To Thomas' irritation the other two started talking in German, to help 'get into character.' Watching them he realised that, although he had guessed wrong, Roxton was right. They were a pair. They were incredibly competitive. Even now, when the fate of the Belfort peace conference and Milly Summerlee's life hung in the balance, they were sitting in the front seat, scoring points off each other, just as they probably did 20 years ago in the Chittagong jungle.

They turned north, keeping the dark forested hills of the Schwarzwald to their right. Soon they started to see people with their belongings moving north in carts and trucks. As they got closer to Freiburg they started to encounter crowds of refugees.

Their progress slowed rapidly and Roberts had to lean out the window shouting and waving a pistol to get people to move out of the way. The atmosphere was tense and they frequently came across knots of soldiers positioned to keep the traffic moving. They bullied their way through the side streets of Freiburg rather than attempt the town centre, but by now they had lost time.

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It was late evening by the time they got past Freiburg and the roads cleared. Again they started to see empty villages, but this time it looked like the inhabitants had left in a hurry. Instead of the tidy retreat of Mulhausen, here doors were left open and possessions were lying about by the sides of the roads.

'What do we do if he has released teryx into the wild, Captain?' asked Thomas.

'Push on and shoot anything black and feathery,' replied Roberts.

When they reached Emmendingen there was not a single light from any window. They drove into the main square and the Mercedes lights picked up a body lying in front of the old city hall. Roberts jumped out and checked the victim. She returned to the car and shook her head.

‘Long dead and half eaten. It’s the teryx alright. The rest of the villagers must have fled. How are we going to find out where Von Heket is?’

‘We can’t in the dark,’ said Gregory. ‘I suggest we hide the car in those stables and barricade ourselves in the gasthaus until we have light on our side.’

As they parked in the stable Thomas was hit by the smell of decay.

Gregory peered into one of the stalls. ‘There is a half eaten horse in here. Come on, we should get inside quickly. Thomas, bring the guns.’

Inside the inn it was pitch black. Roberts lit some candles and in the dull yellow light Thomas could see a large bar and stairs leading off to one side. Like the stables, the room smelt of decay. Furniture was smashed and at least two large blood stains on the floor suggested people had died there.

Gregory found a notice board. ‘According to these, the good citizens of Emmendingen were very concerned about activities at somewhere called Castle Hochburg.’

‘It’s about three miles north east of here,’ said Roberts.

‘Smells, sounds and disappearances.’

‘Alec. Oh God! Alec look. Will!’

Gregory ran over to the bar where Roberts was pointing to a set of wooden beads on the wall.

Roberts picked it up and showed Gregory the tartan ribbon attached.

‘It’s Will’s *mala*,’ he said. ‘He would never have left them behind willingly. He carried those beads everywhere.’

‘I know,’ said Roberts.

‘If he was in here when the teryx came in he wouldn’t have stood a chance,’ Thomas was beside the windows inspecting the damage. ‘They came through here, smashing the glass and ripping the frames apart.’

‘These beads were hung on a hook not abandoned on the floor.’ Roberts answered. ‘I think we had better go looking for answers at Castle Hochburg. But that will have to wait until the morning. Come on, we will be safer on the first floor.’

‘I would not bank on it,’ said Thomas. ‘Those things will clamber walls easily and glide from building to building. I suggest we try to find a room with strong shutters.’

They worked their way upstairs to the fourth floor where the dormer windows in the bedrooms had shutters. In the largest room they settled down for the night.

Thomas found it hard to sleep. At about midnight there was a thud on the roof tiles above him. He pulled out his pistol and held it up. Footsteps started to move over the top of them. There was a teryx on the roof. He could tell where it was standing. He put his finger on the trigger and then saw Gregory waving at him to put the gun down.

The Captain put his finger to his lips.

A tile cracked and slipped down the roof followed by a flurry of feathers and Thomas saw a dark shape glide past through the cracks in the shutters.

‘Lie low!’ hissed Gregory. ‘That is what we bloody agreed and that is what we will bloody do. Put that gun away.’

Thomas did as he was told.

Dawn came and everyone was already awake. In the bar Roberts dropped to her knees and touched the stone floor.

‘They were in here last night,’ she said. ‘Something was licking at this blood stain recently.’ She stood up and shouldered her gun. ‘We were lucky.’

They returned to the Mercedes and soon found the road to Hochburg. The town gave way to fields and, after only a few minutes, the castle came into view.

‘Pull over!’ shouted Thomas.

Gregory swerved off the road down a short track into a stand of spruces.

‘Look through the trees. That stockade round that old ruin. Same charming design as the one we saw back on the plateau. I bet my life that is the work of Von Heket,’ said Thomas.

‘We are going to have to work out how to get in there,’ said Gregory. ‘Let’s hope no one saw our approach.’

Sitting in the car they could only see part of the dark timbered stockade clasped to the hillside. Gregory got out a pair of binoculars and slowly inspected what he could see of the structure. Then he passed them to Thomas.

‘What do you see, Challenger?’

Thomas repeated the slow survey. ‘No people for a start. No visible vehicles. The stockade gates look like they have been left open.’ He put the binoculars down. ‘Do you think it is abandoned?’

‘We can’t see it all from here, but it certainly isn’t abuzz with life.’

Thomas went to open his door when Gregory stopped him. ‘Just remember those creatures are about Dr Challenger.’

Thomas nodded but he still stepped out and scurried forward to the edge of the coppice. There he could see more of the south-western side of the stockade. Again, he scanned the castle with his binoculars. There was no wind that morning and, except for the odd

birdcall, the countryside was completely still and silent. Thomas kept on scanning, alive to the tiniest movement.

Behind him he heard a gentle rustle of the leaves but felt no breeze. He spun round and, gliding towards him between the branches, was a teryx. It was above Gregory and Roberts and they had not seen it.

It gave the faintest whistle and swept straight towards Thomas.

He just managed to scrabble behind the tree as it landed, claws drawn, where he had been sitting a split second before. He reached for his pistol but then froze as the tree bough was racked with machine gun fire. When the MP 18 stopped he looked round the tree to see Gregory holding the smoking gun and black feathers floating above a twitching body.

Roberts jumped out of the car. 'Nice work, Alec. Subtle as usual. Everyone and everything in the valley knows we are here. Back in the car. Now!'

Thomas tumbled in after Gregory and Roberts jammed the vehicle into reverse.

'Let's hope you are both right about the place being deserted, because we're going straight in with any element of surprise we have left. With luck we can hide in there until everything calms down.'

She accelerated up the hill towards the stockade, sliding round corners as she negotiated the heavy steering round the twists and turns between the high wooden walls. Soon they came to an iron gate but she had to slam on the brakes. Their path was blocked by a burnt-out truck.

Gregory whispered. 'Grab your guns and keep your eyes peeled. We should make for the highest point.'

Thomas loaded his submachine gun and left the car. They slowly skirted round the truck. The pink stone ramparts rose up either side

of them. Ahead they saw another parked car and evidence of teryx attacks.

Gregory counted up the kill sites. ‘I make about a dozen died here. They were probably out of that truck.’

Thomas stepped between the wall and the burnt out vehicle and felt something pull at his leg.

‘Get down!’ shouted Gregory as he rammed into Thomas, sending them both tumbling down the hill.

As he came to a stop an explosion by the truck knocked the wind out of him and left Thomas’ ears humming. He sat up and shook his head as little bits of dirt rained down on him.

‘What did I bloody say?’ spat Gregory, “Keep your eyes peeled”. He stood up and brushed himself down. ‘This place is booby-trapped. Luckily they left the five-second fuse in that grenade. This is not a professional at work.’

He held his hand out to pull Thomas up. ‘Come on let’s find out what is going on here.’

The other side of the truck Roberts was wiping mud off her face. ‘Thank you, Thomas. You take after Alec.’

Thomas offered her his handkerchief. She smiled. ‘At least you came prepared.’

Together they headed into the castle. To their left were some stone stairs that led up through a tunnel in the wall.

Roberts signalled for them to stop and pointed to the base of the stairs. The walls had been blackened by an explosion and slumped in a heap half way up was a dead teryx.

‘It looks like the only way in,’ whispered Thomas.

‘Eyes peeled,’ growled Gregory as he slowly moved up the stairs. Just before the top Thomas and Roberts hung back as he dropped down and peered round the wall.

The whole tunnel erupted into life. Stone fragments and bullets ricocheted round the walls. All three flattened themselves down on the stairs while the storm of metal and sandstone swirled around them.

After a few seconds the shooting stopped, leaving the tunnel filled with dust. Before Thomas could gather his thoughts, Roberts grabbed him and hauled him up the stairs and out of the tunnel. Gregory was already out and hiding behind a low wall. The other two dived down next to him. The clouds of billowing dust from the tunnel had covered their movements.

Thomas looked at Gregory. His face was bleeding from numerous small cuts caused by the stone fragments.

‘Are you alright?’ he asked

‘Never better.’ Gregory replied. ‘ Maxim?’ he said looking at Roberts.

‘Yup. Useless shot whoever it is,’ she gasped.

The dust started to clear and they saw they were in a large courtyard that used to be the castle keep. In the centre of the open ground was a defensive position built out of sandbags and, from their position, they could see someone fiddling with the machine gun.

‘Easily the worse place possible to put your machine gun,’ said Gregory. ‘Right, let’s get this over with quickly.’

Thomas peered over the wall at the defender and saw his arms reach behind his head and pull his hair back into a bunch.

It was like a lightning bolt hit Thomas. He stood straight up and leapt over the wall.

‘Challenger!’ shouted Gregory after him. ‘You crazy bastard!’

But Thomas took no notice. He ran straight at the pile of sandbags. He saw the machine gun swing round and face him. He stalled thirty feet from the gently steaming barrel and dropped his MP 18. He spread his arms and smiled.

‘Thomas?’ said a tiny voice from behind the sandbags. ‘Thomas! Oh my God!’

Milly jumped up from behind the machine gun. ‘You idiot!’ she shouted.

‘I bloody agree!’ said Gregory from behind the wall.

‘I almost shot you.’

‘Oh that’s nice. I slog across miles of teryx-infested enemy territory to save you and you just call me an idiot.’

Milly covered her mouth and started to cry.

Thomas raced up to her and hauled her out from behind the gun. For a moment, he just looked at her beautiful face. Then he kissed her on her forehead, her eyes, her cheeks and her lips.

‘I am so sorry,’ he said. ‘I will never leave you again, wherever in the world you go.’

‘You don’t have to say sorry. It was just the thought of you still being alive has been pretty much all that has kept me going and I almost killed you. Everything has been so foul, so much death, so much blood. I was just trying to survive. I would have shot anyone, anything that came up those stairs. I didn’t care. And then it was you. Sweet, gentle, lovely you. I’m sorry.’

Suddenly she pulled back. ‘But it is not safe. How did you get here?’

‘I had help,’ he said nodding to the low wall where Roberts and Gregory were standing with broad smiles on their faces.

‘Is that it? No army.’

Roberts looked offended. ‘That’s not very welcoming.’

‘No, you don’t understand,’ said Milly. ‘There are these creatures. They are everywhere. They are …’

‘Called teryx,’ interrupted Roberts.

‘It’s alright we know about these creatures.’ said Thomas reassuringly. ‘This is Corporal Freya Roberts and Captain Alec Gregory. They are here to help. All three of us have encountered teryx before and we have come to get you out of here.’

Gregory cleared his throat. ‘But first we have a job to do I am afraid. Miss Summerlee, is there anyone else alive up here?’

‘No, not a soul. Von Heket saw to that. There were others when I arrived, but he got his creatures to kill them all.’

Gregory glanced at his sister and then tried a different tack. ‘Where is Von Heket now?’

‘He left about three days ago. This is his place though. Do you know him? He is mad. Quite mad. We must get out of here. I heard a car. Is that yours?’

‘Do you know what he is planning?’

‘How do I know? He breeds hundreds and hundreds of vile killers, throws them out into the forest and then disappears stripped to the waist and smeared in some stinky liquid. Thomas, we have to leave. Now!’

Thomas held her hands and looked questioningly at Gregory.

‘I am sorry,’ said Gregory, ‘but this is our one chance to unlock this man’s secrets. He won’t have expected us to be here and we must find out what he is planning.’

‘Mills?’ pleaded Thomas. ‘It’s important. There is a peace conference here in a few days. We think he wants to destroy it and prolong the fighting. This is far bigger than us, Milly. He has to be stopped… Is there anything he said?’

Milly burrowed her head into Thomas’ chest. She thought of the tide of black feathery creatures and the manic smile on Von Heket’s face. She remembered all the killing and the teryx at the window. She felt herself sob.

Roberts came up close and handed her a handkerchief. ‘I know you are probably not used to all this, but we need you to keep it together. ’

Thomas winced at her patronising tone. He felt Milly stiffen and she pushed him away.

She did not look at Roberts but after a pause said: ‘That long building down there seems to be some sort of lab. I have checked all the others and there is nothing.’

‘Thanks, you are very brave,’ said Roberts before she and Gregory hurried down the hill.

‘ “Very brave”!’ muttered Milly as she and Thomas followed them. ‘You have no idea lady.’ She looked at the handkerchief. ‘Thomas, is this yours?’

He knew what she was asking and now was not the time. ‘Yes. Looks like it. Come on, they have got inside.’

‘I am staying here,’ she said.

‘It could be dangerous.’

‘Thomas, I have been here alone for the past three days! What is it with you people. I know how dangerous it is. Go explore with that woman. I am going back to where I know I will be safe.’

She turned and hurried back up the hill. Thomas was torn.

‘Do you know what this is, Challenger?’ Gregory called out.

He started to walk after Milly.

‘Doctor?’ Roberts was at the door. ‘I think Miss Summerlee was very clear she knew how to survive here. On the other hand we need your expertise.’

Milly disappeared into a hut and Thomas reluctantly turned back to the lab. Inside, the benches were covered in complex technical equipment. There were the usual range of chemicals and glassware found in any modern biological lab.

Dissected samples floated in large jars. On one wall there were three large blackboards with detailed diagrams of what looked like an animal’s nervous system. On the other were maps of the forest around the castle with points marked up and columns of writing next to each one.

As Thomas studied these he heard a faint knocking sound. He traced it to a stack of incubators further down the lab. Through the glass lid of one he could see two ugly little dinosaur chicks had hatched, their feathers still stuck to their skin. He looked at them for a moment and then moved on. He was not going to help release more teryx into the world.

‘This is all soil science equipment,’ he said. ‘They must have been sampling to find the ideal nesting areas for the teryx. We should take that wall map. It will help the authorities find the nesting sites.’

Thomas continued down to the far end of the lab. Here it was divided into a number of rooms. Through the glass door of the first room he could see a half-dissected teryx corpse rotting on the table and there was condensation on the windows. He decided to move on. The second room was full of electronic equipment. Inside he found a state of the art phonograph recorder, players and shelves of disc recordings all carefully labelled. Beneath these were several boxes with different- sized bird whistles in each.

‘What has he been using these for?’ he mumbled. ‘It looks like he has been recording verbal communication between teryx and milling whistles to mimic their language.’

‘Why did he leave all this all this here for others to find?’ asked Gregory.

‘Maybe he just didn’t care. Summerlee said he was completely mad,’ said Roberts.
‘“Stripped to waist and smeared in stinky liquid” I think were her words.’

Thomas spun round. ‘Say that again!’

‘Stripped-.’

‘That’s it, of course. Stinky!’ Thomas ran back to the dissection lab and tried the door. It was locked. He pulled out his pistol and smashed the glass before reaching in and unlocking it from the inside. Flies swarmed into the corridor along with a foul, putrid smell.

‘Did you have to do that?’ said Gregory.

‘There,’ said Thomas. ‘Now we are getting somewhere.’ He was pointing to the bin, which contained a pile of burnt paper. Thomas lifted some of the pieces out. ‘Here is the research he did feel was important enough to destroy.’

Thomas searched round the room and studied the rotting teryx body in the middle. There was a lot of distilling equipment on one bench. He picked up one beaker with some brown residue at the bottom and smelt it.

His head darted back and he pulled a face. Even in a room of rotting meat, the residue was pungent. Elsewhere there was a collection of small black bottles.

‘Stinky!’ he said again in triumph. ‘It’s smell! He might be able to communicate with sound, but smell controls them. We need to

search this room. Captain, can you take a closer look at that corpse and try and identify what organ he has been operating on.'

'Really?' said Gregory.

Outside, Milly had headed back to the room with the large window to arm herself. No one was listening to her. They didn't appreciate how dangerous the teryx were but, worse, they seemed to be underestimating Von Heket. He was bound to have another trick up his sleeve.

A movement in the window caught her eye. Below, the southern valley stretched away from her, with dense trees on both side and fields in the centre. At the far end there was movement all along the tree line.

'Thomas!' she screamed at the top of her voice. 'Thomas, come now!'

Time seemed to slow and there was ringing in her ears. She could hear Thomas calling her but the sight before her swamped her senses.

He arrived next to her, out of breath from his sprint. 'Are you alright?'

'I told you!' she cried pointing out the window. 'I told you! We are trapped.'

At the end of the valley, teryx were coming out from the forest cover into the open; not one or two, but hundreds. As Thomas looked they just kept flooding out.

'It's a fucking flock,' said Gregory from behind them. 'Let's go. We need to get to the road before they cut us off.'

'What about Will?!' said Roberts. 'We have to find out what happened to him.'

Milly rounded on her, panic in her voice. ‘I don’t care about your Will! Everyone here died. Do you understand? Everyone! We will too if we stay. We are going!’

‘I have faced these creatures before. I am not leaving.’

‘Be quiet!’ Thomas was staring out the window.

The crowd of black shapes started to move in a pattern. They were circling something. Out of the woods came a pale shape. It was Von Heket.

Thomas gasped. ‘We go right now. It’s not a flock, it’s a swarm. He has created a swarm and he is controlling it.’

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Gregory wrestled the heavy Mercedes past the stockade walls and swung out onto the road to Emmendingen. Next to him in the passenger seat Roberts had about half a dozen pistols in her lap. She hid her fury at being overruled and dragged away from the castle by methodically checking they were all loaded.

In the back, Thomas was fitting new magazines on their machine guns.

Sitting next to him Milly looked out of one of the holes in the metal plates that covered the side window. The teryx were a lot closer now. The lead adults peeled off the swarm and headed across the fields to intercept the car. She looked at the pistol she had been given and then at Thomas.

He reached out and touched her face. 'Don't worry. I survived these bastards before and I am not going to lose you now. Get into the foot well on the other side and ...' He stopped.

Milly was giving him an icy stare. 'Would you suggest Corporal Roberts did the same?'

'Sorry… What I meant to say was, would you like the MP 18 or a Luger?'

She took the submachine gun and wriggled past him, pushing her gun through one of the slots and waited for the predators to close.

Thomas did the same but faced a little more forward.

From where she was Milly could see little. She held her breath and waited. Moments passed and the car raced along the bumpy road. Then her slim field of vision filled with claws, feathers and teeth.

'Now!' shouted Thomas. The machine guns opened fire. The interior filled with cartridges, blue smoke and the deafening pounding of gunfire.

Roberts opened up with her two pistols. The front window shattered and glass showered through the car.

Thomas's magazine emptied and he turned to reload. He managed a strained smile to Milly just as the car lurched as something hit the side. A teryx had clambered on to the running board. It started tearing at the door and shrieking. Thomas swung round and a short burst loosened its grip.

'When you are ready,' bellowed Gregory at Roberts. Another creature was sitting on the bonnet. It lashed at the driver but the chicken

wire held firm. She levelled both pistols at point blank range to see it off.

'We are outstripping them!' shouted Thomas.

Milly sat further up and looked out the small back window. He was right. They had almost reached the trees and the swarm was behind them. It was now a straight race and the car was faster. Two large teryx kept pace but then dropped back.

But, just at that moment, something hit the roof, hard. One had been tracking them through the tree branches and had dropped down on top of the car.

Without thinking Milly opened up through the metal roof. There was a hideous squawk and a black feathery bundle rolled off the back of the speeding Mercedes.

'We've done it !' cried Thomas. 'God, that was close!'

Gregory gunned the car down into Emmendingen, raced through the cobbled streets and then out and down the valley towards Freiburg.

Milly threw down her gun. 'I warned you. I said we had to leave. I said Von Heket had something up his sleeve. We almost left it too late!'

'Piece of cake,' said Roberts from the front.

Milly turned to Thomas and mouthed 'piece of cake'.

Thomas smiled weakly and shrugged.

'So, Dr Challenger,' shouted Gregory from the front, 'any idea how Von Heket is going to get all those teryx down to the peace conference?'

'He has been distilling teryx pheromones.'

'Ferry what?'

‘Pheromones – chemicals released by one animal to affect another’s behaviour. It has only been proved in insects, but I believe all animals use them, including humans. He must have worked out exactly how much he needs to dominate their social group.’

Roberts looked back at Thomas. ‘Fascinating, but is he a threat to the peace conference, or just another one of German’s many problems once this God forsaken war is finally over?’

‘Stop the car, Captain,’ said Thomas. ‘And get the map out.’

On the deserted road south of Emmendingen, they drew to a halt.

As they climbed out Milly found a long claw trapped in the door with the tendon still dangling off.

Thomas laid out the map on the bonnet.

‘Von Heket has a swarm of carnivorous teryx back there and it is my guess he is going to lead them directly to Altkirch. Remember, you told me that Ludendorff has insisted on all our top brass attending. That has to be the plan. Kill the Allied commanders and counter attack in the chaos. They even arrived by plane to make sure they can escape.’

‘How’s he going to get them past Freiburg and all those refugees? Presumably he doesn’t want his swarm to fill up on the locals.’ asked Gregory.

‘I am not sure he cares, but someone has evacuated Mulhausen to the south.’ Thomas studied the map again. ‘My guess is he will keep hidden in the Black Forest, to the east, until he is as close as possible to Altkirch, then cut across the open ground at night and surprise everyone at first light. The good news is that, in this car, we should get to Altkirch a good two days ahead of him.’

‘In that case let’s try and think of a suitably nasty surprise,’ said Roberts slapping his shoulder.

Thomas smiled at her and then looked across to see Milly watching him. He had just saved her life but he couldn't help feeling he had done something wrong.

Soon the Mercedes was speeding south again.

Gradually their progress slowed. They were getting close to Freiburg and crowds of refugees began to fill the roads. Pushing and hooting they began to work their way back through the side roads as before, but this time it seemed people noticed them more because they were moving against the crowds. As their pace reduced to a crawl, tension inside the car grew.

Just as they thought they were clearing the city they came across a huge cart, loaded with furniture, that had lost its wheel and was completely blocking the road. Leaning against the cart was a large red-faced farmer with a shaven head and huge moustache. He didn't seem too concerned that he was blocking the road, in fact he was munching an apple and ignoring the chaos.

'You lot stay here,' said Gregory. 'I'll see if I can help this fellow move his cart.'

'Gently does it,' warned Roberts as he got out.

Thomas watched as Gregory approached the man.

He smiled and the conversation seemed to go well for a while, but it soon became obvious that the farmer was waiting for something and was not about to help Gregory get past.

The Captain started to look exasperated and raised his voice. Roberts jumped out but, before she could reach them, the farmer shouted back a phrase that in any language sounded rude. So Gregory punched him.

But the farmer was made of firmer stuff than Gregory had anticipated. He staggered, but did not go down.

Gregory could probably have dealt with the one man but, just at that point, three large lads appeared from around the side of the cart, pushing a repaired wheel. They were clearly the farmer's sons.

'I'll be right back,' Thomas said to Milly.

'No! Let's just run,' but it was too late, he had gone.

By the time Thomas got to the cart a nasty brawl had developed. Others had started to join in and there was the danger it could turn into a full-scale riot. Gregory managed to fell the farmer but was now being held by two men.

Thomas leapt to his defence, kicking, punching and barging until he could drag the Captain away. But, before Gregory could get to his feet, shots rang out and Thomas saw German soldiers appear at the end of the street. At the same time he noticed Roberts steaming towards him. She threw herself low at his legs and he collapsed to the floor on top of Gregory.

As they lay on the ground, a volley of shots racked across the fighting group and several men fell.

After that everyone stayed down and covered their heads as the platoon of soldiers advanced down the street with their bayonets fixed and held at the ready.

They didn't care who had started the fight or the circumstances. Their instructions were to keep the peace at all cost. All over the country riots were being violently put down and Freiburg was no different. There was a lot of shouting and orders. Everyone on the floor was arrested and their hands were bound. One of the badly injured sons was shot where he lay.

Thomas, Roberts and Gregory all looked at each other. This was a disaster. They had to escape, but they now had several guns pointing at them. They had just got to their feet with their hands on their heads when Thomas noticed two soldiers inspecting their car. There was nothing he could do.

A bayonet dug in his side and he was forced down a side street with the others. Moments earlier he had been feeling triumphant having found Milly and discovered the German plan. Now everything had crumbled. It would all be for nothing.

He tried to say something to Gregory but the Captain signalled silence. 'Only German,' he whispered.

'Das ist deine Schuld. Du dummer idiot,' muttered Roberts scowling at her brother.

The group were dragged and shoved along the narrow street until they came out into the wide Kaiserstrasse. It was crowded, like everywhere in Freiburg, but the people made way for them. Soon they arrived at a decorative old gatehouse where they were led up some red stone stairs into a room with high small windows. The soldiers walked out and locked the door behind them.

They sank to the floor. Somewhere out there Von Heket was getting closer and closer to his target and they were hopelessly trapped. Opposite them the six civilians who were arrested with them muttered amongst themselves about the fight. Thomas had to sit in silence. One word of English and their situation would get worse, if that was possible.

Soon someone would come to interrogate them, or at least take their details, and then they could try and run for it. But no one came. The light faded in the little windows and they were left in almost total darkness. They waited all night but still there was no movement outside, just the hum from the street below and the odd rumble of trams.

Thomas woke the next morning with a sick feeling in his stomach. Someone had to come if only to feed them.

Gregory whispered close to him. 'We can't wait any more. Freya and I are going to start a fight again. Hopefully the bastards will come and investigate.'

‘What if they don’t?’ he whispered back. ‘There are six of them and our hands are tied.’

‘Any better bloody suggestions?’

‘Yes,’ said Thomas and he got up and stumbled his way to the door. Once he found it he started kicking it and shouted, ‘Open up I am a British spy. Let me talk to your superiors. Ich bin ein spy! Ich bin British!’

At first there was nothing from outside but, inside the room, the other Germans started to get aggressive.

Gregory’s voice very close to him whispered. ‘Well, if your plan doesn’t work it sounds like we will get our fight anyway.’

Thomas continued to frantically kick the door and shout while Gregory stood off against the other prisoners.

Everyone stopped when there came the sound of a metal key in the lock. Surprisingly, there was not a word from the guard outside.

Thomas held his breath as the door opened just enough for him to see the man standing the other side. As he looked, expecting some instruction, a face popped out from behind him. It was Milly and she was holding a pistol to the guard’s head.

‘Do you need me to write an invite?’ she hissed.

Thomas nodded to Gregory and Roberts and they slipped out before the other prisoners could follow. Just for good measure Gregory head butted the guard in the face on the way past, knocking him backwards into the cell, before Milly slammed the door shut, locking it again.

As she turned to face them Thomas noticed she had managed to find some make up to put on.

‘Don’t ask,’ Milly said untying them. ‘We have about one minute before the other guard gets back with my drink. Now run!’

In moments they were down the stone stairs, out of the gatehouse and into the crowded street. As calmly as possible, they mingled and slipped down a side street, heading south out of the city. By the river they stopped amongst the trees.

'What did you have to do to those guards?' Thomas asked Milly.

'What part of "Don't ask" don't you understand? I was expecting you lot to save me, not the other way round,' and she stalked off ahead.

Roberts stepped up next to him. 'I'm impressed. I wonder what she had to do to survive with Von Heket.'

Thomas glared at Roberts. 'I know you like playing games, Freya and you don't like to lose, do you? Well, get used to it. You will not win this one.'

He hurried ahead to catch up with Milly. 'Do you know what they did with the Mercedes, Milly?'.

'No chance we will get it back. I rolled out right after you and just managed to bring your knapsack. The moment those soldiers saw the submachine guns they were all over it like ants on honey. They must have driven it away.'

'Von Heket will be ahead of us now and, without transport, we will never be able to warn Creed or the Generals. We must find transport.'

Milly handed Thomas his knapsack and they set off along the roads full of refugees. There were few cars on the road and all the horses and wagons they saw were well attended and overloaded.

It was afternoon before they saw a possible target. By the side of the road was a large ladder wagon, half filled with clothes and bedding, and with a pair of horses harnessed to the front. But there was no sign of its owner. Gregory wandered round the vehicle and patted the horses but no one came to talk to him.

He nodded to the others and they all hurried over and, as casually as possible, jumped on board. Gregory grabbed the reins and gently coaxed the horses round. After an awkward manoeuvre they headed off south at a sedate pace. As soon as they were clear of Freiburg the roads began to empty and Gregory could crack the whip. The startled horses began to speed up and only then did the owner, who had been asleep amongst the bedding, wake up.

Seconds later Roberts persuaded him to go back to sleep again, with the help of a rung from the ladder.

Initially the horses kept up a quick pace and, with the clear roads, they made good progress, but soon they had to slow as the horses tired. It was late afternoon and, to the east, they could see the thickly wooded hills where they guessed Von Heket's swarm was hiding.

Thomas sat facing east as they travelled, scanning the horizon for any sign of the teryx. He had no idea what they would do if they were attacked. They only had one pistol between them and a folding knife from the unconscious farmer. Every time the horses pulled or spooked he fancied they smelt a predator.

A silence descended on the cart. Thomas guessed that Roberts and Gregory were stewing on a mission that was only half complete. Their brother was probably dead, but they didn't know how he met his end. They also had to work out how they were going to warn Creed of such an improbable danger as the teryx, whilst explaining why they had decided to disobey orders.

However, he was more concerned about Milly. She must have been through hell with Von Heket. She was sitting hugging herself and rocking back and forth. He was beginning to understand that there was going to be more to rescuing her than just taking her away from the castle.

He shuffled over beside her. 'Can I put my arm round you?'

She shrugged, but seemed happy enough that he did.

'You have been incredibly … '.

'… brave. I know. You are even beginning to sound like *her*. I just survived, that's all. What was the alternative? Giving up?'

'Isn't that the bravest thing? Not giving up.'

'It was close. I just can't stand the idea of those things … eating me.' She shivered.

He waited for her to choose where the conversation went, but she decided to change the subject. 'So you were right about the Germans and the dinosaurs.'

'Yes, but I never could have imagined the teryx.'

'Tell me about the plateau.'

Thomas smiled slightly. 'It is an extraordinary place. I really do now understand my father's obsession. The creatures there are breath-taking, but it is damaged. It is frightening what the German army managed to do in such a short space of time. It has survived millions of years, but it needs protecting right now if it is to last the next ten.'

She stared into the dark forests and did not seem to share his concern.

'What is more,' he added, 'it is one of the few places on earth at the moment you can guarantee there are no teryx.'

She smiled at his slight joke.

As the cart progressed south he described herds of iguanodon, fields of cycads and flocks of phorusrhacos.. He told her about the joy and sadness of finding his father's body, but he avoided the pterosaur attack and the slaughtered Accala.

Milly rested her head on his shoulder as he got on to the gentle troop of pithecanthropus.

‘They weren’t red devils at all,’ he said. ‘We had them wrong. Hand me my knapsack.’ He rummaged in the bottom. ‘I am so grateful this was the one thing you brought with you from the Mercedes.’

‘I think a weapon would have been more useful,’ she muttered.

He pulled out the old exercise book. ‘This is the diary my father kept while he was up there. When we have more time you might like to read it.’

‘What’s this?’ asked Milly reaching into the bottom of the knapsack and pulling out a strange bottle of smelly liquor.

‘He had that on his lap. Just take a sniff.’

Milly jolted backwards. ‘Woah! Even with the top on its overpowering. Smells like the megalosaur muck I had on my clothes.’

‘I think that is what spooked the teryx in the Indian village. You said the stench of megalosaur crap saved you from them. No wonder the old man had it on his lap. My guess is this is extract of megalosaur, maybe from its anal gland or something. If they do communicate through smell then this is concentrated teryx repellent.’

‘I am not going to let one of those things kill me,’ she said looking down at her lap where she was cradling the pistol.

‘I won’t let them. I promise.’

Then he noticed how slowly they were going. ‘Can we pick up the pace, Captain?’

‘The bloody horses,’ Gregory replied, ‘I keep pushing them but they just can’t keep the pace up.’ The sun was setting and he glanced across at the forest. ‘The road turns west soon. Thank God.’

They crossed the Rhine as night fell and arrived at Mulhausen in the pitch black. At a canal side they let the exhausted horses drink but they had no time to rest. Their anxiety to arrive in Altkirch before

dawn meant they were pushing on again after only a few minutes. They crossed the deserted rail tracks and took what they hoped was the road south. There was no moon and so the world was made up of silhouettes and dim shadows. Now Milly, Thomas and Roberts were all staring into the darkness, fancying a teryx could materialise from anywhere.

The night wore on and their pace just seemed to slow to a crawl. Gregory had to use the whip more and more, but with less and less effect. Eventually the inevitable happened. One horse stumbled and fell to the ground. The other was dragged over with it.

Roberts jumped down and cut them out of the harness. They were both exhausted and would take them no further.

'Come on,' she said. 'We will just have to walk it. It can't be that much further.'

Together they set off into the night. After another two hours the sky began to lighten. Trees, fields and a horizon began to materialise out of the darkness. Long before they could see anything, they heard the distant thrum of engines.

Gregory stopped to listen. 'Maybach's. Six cylinder.'

'Altkirch airfield?' said Thomas.

'Benz too. They are busy. At least one airship and bombers. Come on we need to hurry.'

All four began to run. The road rose in front of them and as they crested the hill they could see the vast, dark bulk of a Zeppelin dwarfing the line of trees ahead, the white letters L64 marked out on the side.

Gregory stopped at a field gate and watched. 'V class height climber,' he said. 'They are preparing for take-off.'

Roberts nodded. 'They know what's coming and they are making a run for it. We have got to do something.'

Thomas turned to Milly and noticed she was looking the other way. ‘They are here!’ she whispered.

He followed her look down the road they had just run up and there, in the dim light of the new day, was the unmistakable shape of a teryx bobbing from one foot to another.

‘Right. Move!’ shouted Gregory. ‘We must get to the airfield.’

They jumped the gate and crossed the open field to the borders of the aerodrome. It was a vast area of short grass with one hanger and a handful of storage buildings next to it. The airship was tethered in front of these. Thomas counted three other large Gotha bombers and half a dozen Fokkers. None of the fighters were prepped yet, but the huge bombers already had their engines turning, ready for take-off. Staff cars clustered round the zeppelin and several officers were climbing aboard.

‘We can stay hidden if we stick to that hedgerow to the right,’ gasped Gregory. ‘We will regroup in the far right hand hut.’

Thomas could see Milly was scared and exhausted. She kept looking back for teryx. He grasped her hand and dragged her after him. After tracking the hedge for a while they slipped across a small piece of open ground and bundled into the hut. It was a tool shed full of bits of engine, oil drums and fire extinguishers.

‘We’ve run out of time,’ panted Gregory. ‘We will never get up the hill to Altkirch before the swarm arrives.’

‘Goddamn it! Goddamn him! Goddamn those feathered bastards!’ raged Roberts. ‘They’re not going to bloody win. We must be able to do something. Can we blow them up with these oil drums?’

Gregory smiled. ‘Sod the fuckers. Why not? Draw the swarm towards us and take as many with us as possible.’

‘No!’ shouted Thomas. ‘Just calm down you two.’ He had noticed Milly was staring out of the window at the horizon where several

teryx had now appeared, bounding towards the airfield. She had the pistol in her hand.

'No one need die today! Von Heket doesn't have complete control. We have to out think him… Gregory, do you think you could fly a Gotha?'

'Yes, of course.'

'We are not bloody running,' said Roberts, ' if that is what you are suggesting. We ran from the castle, we are not running now. I, for one, am going to make sure Von Heket pays for what he has done.'

Milly now had her finger on the trigger of the pistol and started to lift it towards her head.

'Milly?' said Thomas.

She turned and looked at him, her expression blank.

'Listen to me. I have an idea. Trust me.'

'I will not be eaten.'

He forced a steely calm into his voice. 'None of us will. There is a way. There is hope. But I do need your help, Mills. This won't work without you. We all need you.'

She drew a long breath and then handed the pistol to Roberts. 'You are a better shot,' she muttered.

Thomas barked at the other two. 'Get me one of those Gothas now. You are just going to have to trust me.' Then he grabbed Milly by the shoulders. 'Now Milly, you need to help me carry these fire extinguishers.'

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

The Germans had finished boarding the L64 and, as Thomas watched from the hut, two lines of ground staff formed along its guide ropes and started pulling the vast floating airship clear of the hanger.

'I bet those poor lads have no idea what is heading across the fields towards them,' said Milly.

'Shh!' hissed Thomas. 'They are nearly there. No one is taking any notice.'

Gregory and Roberts were walking casually up behind the nearest Gotha. It was crewed up and the engines were running but the chocks were still in place. Its ground crew were all helping with the zeppelin. As the pair got close, they split up. Gregory ducked under the fuselage and crawled forward, unseen by the airmen. Roberts walked in the open until she was beside the rear gunner and called out. He clearly could not hear what she was saying over the noise of the engines. Suspecting nothing, he leant down to talk to her and she shot him in the head.

His body lay half out of his cockpit and, with a tug, Roberts had him on the ground.

'Come on,' said Thomas. 'This is it!'

Both hurried out of the hut, weighed down by four fire extinguishers. As they approached the huge bomber, they saw Gregory beneath the plane pulling the chocks away. With nothing to hold it back it began to creep forward.

The pilot stood up to see what was happening and, again, Roberts shot him and he dropped down inside the plane. By now the forward gunner had seen them. He drew his Luger and started firing at Gregory.

The Captain crouched and scrambled back under the plane. He was now out of sight of the gunner but he could not reach the pilot's seat without being shot at.

Thomas arrived beside the fuselage and lobbed his fire extinguishers into the rear gunner's position. As he did so a bullet cracked past his head. The forward gunner was standing up to get a better view and had seen him.

Thomas turned back to warn Milly and realised she was in full view of the gunner. She was rooted to the spot with the extinguishers by her side.

The gunner raised his gun and Thomas screamed at her.

A shot rang out above the noise of the engines but Milly remained standing.

Thomas looked back as the gunner toppled out of his seat. Roberts had shot the third airman.

Thomas grabbed the rear machine gun for support and clambered up and into the cockpit. Inside and on the floor there was a second parabellum. It faced down a rear gun tunnel that opened out beneath the fuselage.

He wriggled down into the plane and could see inside the fuselage was a long wooden box like a flying coffin. The bomb chamber had been removed and temporary seats fixed in for half a dozen passengers. Unfortunately, sitting in one of the seats, was the wounded pilot. For a moment they both froze, neither had a weapon.

Further down Gregory had now appeared in the pilot's seat. On seeing the airman he grabbed for his legs, but the wounded man kicked out catching him in the face.

Thomas called out and the pilot turned back to receive the full force of a metal fire extinguisher on the side of the head.

Together Thomas and Gregory rolled the unconscious man to one side before Thomas stood up to help Milly and the remaining extinguishers into the plane.

Gregory settled into the pilot's seat and, beyond that, Roberts appeared in the forward gun position and crouched low and out of sight.

Thomas glanced back at the airfield. The airship was now airborne and slowly turning north. Meanwhile, without the chocks, their Gotha had rolled out to sit alone in front of the assembled ground crew. At last, despite the chaos and noise, the Germans had started to notice them.

There was a deafening roar as Gregory throttled up the props and taxied out into the field.

Several crew started waving at them and Thomas optimistically waved back. Some started to run towards them, shouting. Moments later the rest followed.

Despite the power of the two Benz engines the vast machine only seemed to be crawling and the crowd was gaining on them.

There was a parabellum machine gun next to him, but he had no idea what to do with it. He ducked back down into the plane trying to think what he could do next. Further along he could see Roberts shouting at him, but could hear nothing over the roar of the engines.

Suddenly Milly seized his hands and drew him close. 'It will be alright,' she shouted into his ear. 'I believe in you.' And she kissed him.

At the same moment Roberts barged past them and then stood up in the rear gun position. She pulled an ammunition belt out of a metal box at her feet and loaded the rear parabellum with a couple of yanks on the charging handle. Then she hauled the weapon round to face the rear and opened fire.

The turret shook with each round as smoking cartridges bounced and skittered around her feet. Thomas thought of the angry and confused faces that had been running towards him only moments earlier and covered his face with his hands.

The bomber began to pick up speed and, as it bounced across the grass, he was thrown violently out of his seat. As he steadied himself he felt his stomach begin to lurch and then they were airborne.

Roberts ducked back down and squatted in front of Thomas. Her large brown eyes were bright from the battle. Arterial blood freckled her fierce face.

She leant very close so Thomas could hear her over the engine noise. 'Your turn now. This plan of yours better bloody work.'

Then she worked her way back up to the front turret. Thomas crawled after her as far as Gregory who was struggling with the heavy controls. He wriggled up next to the pilot's seat and looked out of the cockpit.

Gregory had taken off to the south and was now banking the cumbersome biplane to the west. Washed by bright morning sun the whole drama was unfolding below. To the east, the Germans had abandoned Altkirch. A few Allied personal were hurrying into the streets, woken by tumult coming up from the aerodrome.

There was chaos outside the hanger. Some of the ground crew were running to start up the fighters. Small puffs of smoke drifting from a crowd by the huts revealed they were being shot at. The second Gotha was just taking off and the third taxiing to one end of the field to follow its fellow bomber into the air.

What this crew could not see was what lay beyond the hedge they were bouncing towards. The vast teryx swarm almost completely surrounded the airfield. Seething and swirling as it went, it was like a living stain spreading across the green fields. Thomas could see the way the animals were following a pattern, tracking round Von

Heket at the core, and then moving out in wider and wider gyres. All the time they kept up a forward momentum.

As the Gotha swung round to take off a dozen creatures swept down from the trees that bordered the field. The rear gunner was snatched out of his cockpit and thrown onto the grass. The bomber started to accelerate but its pilot was already dead. Two teryx were crawling over the wings towards the forward gunner. Panicking, he could not swing his machine gun round to defend himself

By now the bomber was heading at full throttle back towards the hanger. Too late the fighter crews realised the danger approaching. The Gotha smashed into the first two Fokkers pushing them back into a third. Wings collapsed and the giant Benz props ate their way through the crumpled wrecks. Thick black smoke began to rise into the air and, as the survivors fled, the fuel tanks exploded.

Still the remaining fighters managed to taxi away from the conflagration and into the open field but, by now, they faced a vision of hell; hundreds of bounding, scampering gliding demons. A wall of teeth and claws that they could neither fight against nor run from. Soon all three pilots were dead.

Thomas tore his eyes away from the bedlam beneath.

'I am going to try and spray the swarm while it is in the open. Give me as many low passes as you can,' he yelled in Gregory's ear.

Gregory gave him the thumbs up and he ducked back into the fuselage to where Milly was sitting.

He settled next to her and started to unscrew the top of one of the extinguishers. He signalled for her to do the same with the others. Carefully he pulled out the glass vial under the plunger. Next he unscrewed the bottle of megalosaurus scent from his knapsack and poured some of the contents into the extinguisher.

Instantly the Gotha filled with the eye-watering stench of dinosaur anal gland as Thomas carefully replaced the vial and screwed the

extinguisher up again. Without asking any questions Milly helped him do the same with the other three.

Just as they were finishing, the two seats next to them jumped in the air and Thomas yelped as splinters peppered his leg. A line of bullet holes had appeared the width of the fuselage. He struggled up and looked out of the rear cockpit. Above, the giant zeppelin was climbing away, but to their left and at the same altitude, the forward gunner of the second Gotha had them in his sights. A second burst ripped through the port wing.

He grabbed the machine gun, swung it round and took aim. He fired a long burst until the belt ran out and missed the Gotha completely. Roberts appeared beside him holding the end of a new belt. He flinched as more enemy fire took a piece of the tail off.

Roberts pushed him out the way and reloaded the gun but, as she started to return fire, Gregory banked to the right, taking them away from the Germans.

Thomas looked down and saw that they were rounding the northern limits of the swarm. He would have to leave the other Gotha to Roberts - he had a job to do.

The enemy plane started to gain altitude, waiting to see what Gregory was about to do next. Roberts scampered back to the forward gun, preparing for the next pass.

Thomas dragged one of the extinguishers over to the rear gun tunnel, He pushed the lower machine gun to one side and pointed the extinguisher down the opening.

Milly looked out of the cockpit as Gregory levelled out over the swarm. She tapped him on the shoulder and, when he looked up, she gave Thomas the thumbs up.

He hit the plunger on the extinguisher.

A brown plume filled the tunnel. For a moment the stench of ancient predator enveloped the Gotha before being swirled back and down into the clear morning air, driven by the bomber's vortices.

Gagging, Thomas gave Milly a reassuring smile.

Gregory made his first low past and then turned as tight as the huge machine would allow. But, as he did this, it brought them slowly back on to a head on course towards the other Gotha.

Below, the swarm continued to seep forward. Altkirch was now cut off from the east and north.

They levelled and came in for another pass. Thomas readied the second extinguisher. By now everyone on board had a fine covering of brown megalosaurus scent and all were covering their mouths in cloths.

Roberts steadied her forward gun as, once again, enemy bullets tore into the plane. However, she did not return fire.

Thomas started spraying again, but an enemy round hit the extinguisher, tearing it out of his hands and across the fuselage floor. Stinking brown liquor erupted everywhere. Fortunately, at the same moment, the plane lurched up and it rolled towards the tunnel. One well-aimed kick and Thomas saw it fly out the back of the aircraft, tumbling down onto the swarm beneath.

Milly pushed another into his hands as Roberts finally opened fire. She emptied the entire belt into the middle of the enemy Gotha. Somewhere in that barrage of lead she found her target, the pilot. The bomber tilted down and headed for the ground but not before the rear gunner racked their biplane one more time, tearing into the forward cockpit and hitting Roberts, who slumped to the floor.

Thomas continued spraying but Milly worked forward to check on Roberts. She was trying to sit up and grasping her right shoulder. Blood was dribbling through her fingers. At first she backed away from Milly, like some wounded feral animal.

‘Don’t be stupid!’ she shouted. ‘I am a nurse. You need to pack that. Now!’

Reluctantly she let Milly remove her scarf and try to slow the bleeding.

As Thomas’s third extinguisher ran out it was with some satisfaction he watched the other Gotha crash into the swarm and explode. But he was becoming worried: the swarm didn’t seem to be affected by his spraying. Perhaps he was wrong, or the plane had been flown too high for the megalosaurus scent to frighten the teryx.

Milly joined him, her hands covered in blood. ‘She will survive if we get help soon,’ she yelled.

‘It’s not working,’ he shouted back.

She looked down. ‘No, look! Some of them are peeling off! It’s breaking up!’

Gregory finished the run and took another wide bank.

Milly was right.

Gradually the swarm started to thin out and the teryx fled east and spread out across the fields. Finally, even the very centre of the gyre broke up and left Von Heket alone. He was standing looking up at the plane.

Thomas went forward and shouted at Gregory. ‘Land. Down there, next to Von Heket!’

‘Are you sure?!’

‘We have not beaten him yet. We have just bought some time. Now land!’

Gregory guided the lumbering giant back down onto the field and drew up about a hundred feet from Von Heket, who did not move.

‘Stay here and keep the engines going,’ yelled Thomas. He jumped out and was just about to head off towards Von Heket when a voice stopped him.

‘Stop there, doctor!’

It was Roberts leaning out of the forward cockpit as pale as death and pointing her pistol at him. ‘I am going to kill him. Not you. You will muck it up.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous. You’re wounded.’

‘Still worth two of you.’

‘It is not about killing. It is about taking his power away.’

‘Freya!’ shouted Gregory. ‘He’s right. This is not about Will. The peace conference, remember!’

‘Sod that. He dies by my hand.’

‘We are wasting time!’

Suddenly Roberts dropped out of sight into the cockpit. For a moment Thomas thought she had fainted, then Milly popped up in her place.

‘Only two rounds left. Make them count,’ she shouted as she threw him the pistol.

Thomas looked at the weapon. It was slick with Roberts’ blood.

‘She will be fine,’ Milly continued. ‘Now go!’

Thomas turned and walked towards Von Heket,. Several teryx were still stalking about in the next field and there were many more amongst the trees beyond.

Von Heket still had not moved, a strange smile played on his face. He was shirtless and glistening with sweat. Around his belt were the bottles Milly had described and a bird whistle around his neck.

As Thomas approached he started clapping slowly and then made a low sweeping bow.

‘Congratulations, young man. You must have found a very powerful deterrent. If I can smell it in the air it must be torturing my children. What, may I ask, is your next trick?’

Thomas raised his pistol and held it steady.

Von Heket just laughed. ‘I am sure you are aware your deterrent will soon wear off. Look, they are coming back already. You can, of course, shoot me, but it won’t change anything. They are hungry. They need to feed.’

‘I can stop you and that will be a first step in destroying these abominations you have created.’

‘I didn’t create them. I *released* them. Tell me, to whom do I owe for this stimulating confrontation.’

‘My name is Thomas Challenger and you are the man who desecrated the Japura plateau and destroyed my father’s life’s work.’

‘Challenger, of course! Wonderful! This is too much. I am indeed honoured. But please. You misunderstand. Your father was my hero! It is he who inspired all this.’

‘Rubbish! If he had any idea what you were up to he would have killed you himself.’

Von Heket was incredulous. ‘Are you sure we are talking about the same man. Doesn’t sound like you knew him that well. I was lost until I met your father. He inspired me. He opened my eyes to the evils of modern society. He persuaded me that a return to nature was the only way to stop this never-ending war. This, around you, is the beginning of his cruel Eden. This is all his idea!’

‘I don’t believe you.’

‘Oh, come on, son of the father. Think about it. He slaughtered the pithecanthropus and released the teryx. He hated the authorities and embraced chaos. We were similar. We spent hours discussing how it might be done. You should be proud.’

For a moment Thomas wavered. He remembered Roberts’ reading of the ideas in the diary. He had always assumed his father’s angry rants were just bluster.

‘Thomas!’ screamed Milly. She was pointing to a clutch of teryx that had left the trees and were gradually approaching the plane.

Von Heket smiled and held out his hand. ‘Oh, and Millicent survived. Perfect. Come, Thomas. Do you really want to defend this corrupted world of generals? This is a new beginning. The biggest experiment of our time and you can help me realise it. We can build on your father’s work. You can be like him.’

Thomas took a firm grip on his pistol. It was time for him to act. ‘I do not want to be my father,’ and he fired twice at Von Heket.

Von Heket flinched, but then realised he had not been hit. ‘You missed. Were you trying to frighten me, young Thomas?’

‘I am assuming that the exact concentration of your teryx pheromone is quite important. Too much and their behaviour could become unpredictable. You are quite mad, Von Heket, and your actions will lead to a lot of deaths, but we will quickly exterminate these creatures and you will be forgotten. Trust me on that.’ He turned and ran back towards the plane.

For a moment Von Heket was confused and then he felt liquid running down his leg. Thomas had shot through his pheromone bottles. He was soaked in highly concentrated teryx scent. He looked up at the teryx beginning to reappear from all directions.

Thomas clambered into the plane and slapped Gregory on the shoulder. ‘Get us out of here.’

‘What about Von Heket?’

‘He will get what he deserves.’

He turned back as Gregory throttled up and saw the German start to run. At last he had lost control.

The Gotha gathered speed and took off again. Below, trucks and cars were pouring out of Altkirch, heading west.

On the airfield Von Heket had made it half way across the open grass, but teryx were closing on him from all directions. Suddenly he slowed and looked about. He held his arms out and looked up at their plane laughing.

On some invisible signal, the teryx suddenly accelerated towards him. He was swept up in a struggling mass of animals. Von Heket gave himself to his experiment.

Thomas sat down next to Milly, exhausted. He went to kiss her but they both pulled back. The megalosaurus scent was simply too much. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a large and surprisingly clean handkerchief.

‘You and your bloody handkerchiefs,’ said Milly, shivering slightly.

Gently he cleaned her face and then wiped his own so they could kiss. He had gambled and survived, but he didn’t want to risk any more.

‘Are we safe?’

‘Yes, I said you could trust me. Everything will be alright now.’

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Major Edward Creed adjusted the report on his desk so that it was exactly square in the centre. There was nothing else to clutter its surface except for his Waterman fountain pen, an HH pencil and a blank pad. As his stare wandered round the rest of his office, he noticed one curtain was less pulled than the other. He got up and matched them. Finally he felt comfortable enough to open the door.

'Captain!' he called. 'Please come in.'

Gregory stepped smartly into the office and stood to attention by Creed's desk.

The Major sat and signalled for him to do the same.

'Well, well. What an exciting few weeks we have had,' he said. 'Ludendorff in prison, the German army's complete surrender and now I hear the Kaiser has abdicated. And all with the need for some long, dull peace conference'

'Time to celebrate. The British Empire has never …'

'Yes, yes, yes. I know all that. I wrote the speeches, but you know how I hate 'exciting times'. You and I know it was a close run thing and, since the Belfort Incident, there has been chaos in Germany. Events need to be controlled for everyone's safety. If they have a communist revolution there, like Russia, then we will have just lost the war we won.'

'I understand, Sir.'

'You did well, Captain. This is the only official congratulations you will receive but, suffice to say, I am very pleased I sent you after the young doctor.'

'As my report shows, it was Challenger who saved the day.'

'Yes, that is the only black mark. He is a hero now and I don't like that. God knows what he is going to say next. Does he still trust you?'

‘Absolutely. He believes I am facing a court martial in three days.’

‘In which you will miraculously be cleared. Hurrah!’ Then he tapped the report on his table. ‘But what shall we do about your sister?’

‘She is an excellent agent, Sir, and it is only on the subject of our brother Will that she has shown ill judgement.’

‘But once she has transgressed and got away with it she is more likely to do so again. I mean, are you sure she didn’t develop a weakness for the handsome, heroic Dr Challenger?’

Gregory shifted in his chair. In truth he didn’t know the answer. ‘All I can say is that if he ever truly returned her favour she would run a mile. It is always about the hunt for Freya.’

Creed shook his head. ‘That doesn’t reassure me, Captain. I will have to consider this. Meanwhile, I expect you to keep an eye on her. She is too smart to trust you and we will have to assume she will find out the truth about the trial. I have to warn you, this may not end well.’

He stood. ‘For now, we will have to play along with Challenger’s circus. Fortunately, I already have someone working on his Achilles Heel.’

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Captain Malone and Milly had been sitting on the bench near the Serpentine for about an hour. Thomas thought they made an odd looking couple as he approached. She in a simple lavender dress and wide fashionable straw hat and he in a baggy black suit, grey homburg and dark glasses.

Quite unexpectedly Milly had received a note from Malone a week before. He expressed his delight that she had survived and had warmly wished her a happy and successful life.

‘He is reaching out,’ Milly had said.

‘There is no hint of remorse,’ was Thomas’ reply.

But she was having nothing of his scepticism. She believed him psychologically damaged by the war and that she was in a unique position to help him. Effectively, she was one of his victims, yet she had returned and could forgive him. By return of post she had requested a meeting.

He reminded her of what she had been through with him and that, even before the war, he had been famous for seeking out danger.

To which her reply was; ‘Tosh! No one likes war.’

So Thomas found himself approaching the pair as their meeting was just ending.

As Captain Malone stood and bowed slightly to Milly, Thomas heard. ‘… and if you ever need to talk again, you know how to get hold of me.’

Then he turned to Thomas. ‘Dr Challenger! A pleasure to meet you again and congratulations on your heroic achievements.’

Thomas was suitably modest and Malone continued. ‘I hope you are not too busy to attend a memorial service for Lord Roxton next Wednesday?’

‘Nothing would keep me away.’

‘Good. Then I will see you again there. For now, good day.’

Thomas watched him go. He had enormous respect for the old soldier and all he had been through, but felt somewhere along the way something had become twisted in Captain Malone. Despite his impeccable manners, a darkness had been woken that was consuming him.

‘How did that go then?’ he asked Milly.

She wore a frown. ‘I think it was useful, but I couldn’t escape the feeling that he thought I was the one that needed help, not him.’

‘Maybe we could see him together next time?’

She looked up at Thomas and smiled. ‘That is not the point and you know it. Now did you deal with that damn plant.’

‘Yes. Your father would have been proud. I believe the bennettite has finally been fertilised. Anyway we must hurry. I agreed to meet Creed at the Institute in half an hour. This is going to be a big meeting.’

****

Mr August Pinser, secretary at the Zoological Institute, could not quite believe the note he had just been handed by his assistant. He had set the day aside for some urgent cataloguing and now he was being interrupted by, of all people, Thomas Challenger. The young idiot had turned up in the Hall and interrupted a Royal Entomological Society meeting. What was worse, it was the British Coleopteran Group who had a regular monthly booking that had never been cancelled, even during the air raids. As he stomped down the corridor from his office, he became more and more angry.

Thomas stood in the foyer to the Hall with Milly, waiting as disappointed entomologists wandered out. This time he did not feel the desire to smooth his hair or look at his fingernails.

Mr Pinser arrived just as a particularly grumpy polyphagia expert was leaving. He immediately ran out the door after the scientist, trying to persuade him to come back. After that failed, he returned to confront Thomas.

‘I find it difficult to put into words how angry I am at this turn of events. You have no right to disturb a sitting meeting at the Hall. Your obsession with your father is embarrassing.’

‘Did you not receive the Home Office request for use of the hall?’

‘Yes, and naturally I refused when I saw your name on it.’

‘Well, then the mistake is yours. This is government business. So, just go back to your office August, and don’t disturb us.’

‘How dare you! Now get out of here before I call the police. Let me assure you, you will never attend any event at this society again. And please don’t underestimate my ability to communicate my anger to all the other scientific societies in London.’

At that point Roberts came through the door. This was the first time they had seen her since she had been stretchered away at Altkirch. At first glance it looked like she was in uniform. She wore a dark blue, tight jacket and dress with a low-brimmed, matching hat. Thomas noted she must have dressed to look as severe as possible. Even the sling she wore was made of dark blue material. She did not smile as she approached them.

Milly visibly stiffened.

‘Good afternoon, Thomas, Ms Summerlee.’ Her tone was coldly efficient. ‘It turns out the numbers have increased again. We estimate there will be well over two hundred in attendance and … who *is* this man?’

Pinser was bobbing from one foot to another and had flushed an angry red.

‘I, Madame, am the secretary of the Zoological Institute of England and Wales and, as such, am in charge of everything that goes on in this Hall. And, if you think you are about to hold an impromptu meeting here I can assure you are mistaken. I am calling the police.’

With that he turned and headed back to his office.

‘I didn’t know you were attending, Freya. Where is Creed?’ asked Thomas.

‘Unfortunately, the Major has been detained but he sent me to attend in his absence.’

‘What! But nearly every government in Europe will have representatives here. He cannot … Oh no, of course. Creed would never play second fiddle to anyone and this, as far as he is concerned, is my show. Always calculating. Roxton was so right about that man.’

‘I think you are a little harsh on the Major. He is just very busy. Anyway, as you say, this whole thing has turned into a real circus. Since the teryx horde dispersed there have been sightings and killings across southern Germany, France, Switzerland even as far east as Hungary. No one knows where they will pop up next. Organised eradication isn’t helped by the fact that, since the Kaiser abdicated, Germany seems to have a new revolution every day. We don’t even know who they are sending today. The situation in the Amazon means the Brazilians are coming along with several other South American ambassadors. Oh and Curzon is coming from the War Cabinet, plus an American or two.’

‘Is your brother coming Freya?’

Thomas knew he had hit a nerve. ‘I doubt it,’ she replied. ‘You know his trial is in three days. Now, I suggest you go in and prepare. They will be arriving soon.’

Without another word she turned and went outside to wait for the arriving dignitaries.

Thomas led Milly off to the empty hall where, only a few months before, he had been arrested giving a lecture to six sleeping academics.

‘I wish you wouldn’t insist on using her first name,’ said Milly.

‘It is strange. I am sure she is not a real corporal, and I am not even sure her name was ever Roberts. But her brother uses Freya so, by using it, I feel … well, like I know who I am talking to.’

Milly nodded. ‘You want dominion over her.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Sorry, nothing. Don’t mind me. Just something Von Heket said.’

It took about half an hour for the delegations to arrive and be seated. Thomas had never seen so many top hats and dress uniforms.

When the hall had nearly filled, he stepped up on to the stage and Milly followed him. He cleared his throat and waited for silence among the assembled dignitaries.

Suddenly Pinser appeared at the back of the auditorium. ‘That is him, officer,’ he shouted. ‘I demand you remove him from the stage immediately.’ Pinser had found a local policeman and was determined to escort Thomas from the premises.

‘I knew it! This is some sort of covert meeting, isn’t it?’ Fascists! Communists!’ He turned to the PC who, realising he was outnumbered, was trying to slip back out. ‘No you don’t. You have a job to do. Arrest him!’

The astonished audience began to start to murmur as Pinser marched down the aisle dragging the constable after him.

As he reached the stage the poor policeman noticed Sir George Cave, the Home Secretary, was in the front row. After a quick consultation with his ultimate superior, he grabbed Pinser, who was still remonstrating with Thomas on stage, in an arm-lock and bundled him out again.

The whole incident had been blissfully brief, but Thomas couldn’t help smile at the poetic justice of it all.

It took a few more minutes before calm was restored and Thomas could start to speak.

‘My name is Dr Thomas Challenger and I apologise for that interruption. Thank you all for attending this meeting. May I first introduce the other person on stage, Miss Milly Summerlee,’

‘Ms Summerlee bore witness to more teryx attacks than almost any of us and, what is more, probably got closer to Von Heket than anyone. Reports on the activities of that odious man would be incomplete without her input.’

‘For as long as recorded history, Man has been the dominant species on this planet - the top predator. Some may enjoy the thrill of hunting a tiger for sport but how many have grown up in fear of losing a loved one in the garden or field outside their home. Nature, ladies and gentlemen, is biting back and we urgently need to action.

‘Make no mistake, the war may be over but the teryx present mankind with new threat that, unless we work together, may cost as many lives.’

So, together, Milly and Thomas talked and answered questions on the teryx threat for the next two hours.

****

Later that evening Milly and Thomas walked back to Maida Vale hand in hand. It was clear and still, but no one was afraid of Gotha raids anymore. London was slowly and painfully recovering. They wound their way through Green Park where the AA gun battery was being dismantled and into Hyde Park. Here, other couples were out enjoying the evening air and vendors had gathered round the Albert Memorial, selling chestnuts from hot braziers.

Thomas talked the most, full of the excitement of that evening; what it felt like to have the whole world hanging on their words.

‘On top of everything,’ he said, ‘there were the French, the German and the British military talking about cooperation only weeks after the end of the Great War. Unbelievable!

‘Do you think their idea of a fence will work?’ she said.

‘Not unless they electrify it. They’ll need to catch a few specimens and repeat Von Heket’s work. If they could get them to swarm again, like he did, then they might be able to start an effective cull. The Amazon is a whole different matter.’

‘You want to go back to the plateau, don’t you?’

Thomas looked at her and smiled. ‘Not if you don’t want me to.’

‘Oh, I don’t mind at all, as long as you don’t try to stop me coming with you.’

Thomas grabbed her round the waist and swung her round. ‘Heaven forbid! It will be you and me against the monsters.’

‘Yes, and we will name them all.’

As he dropped her to the ground his expression turned more serious. ‘I am going to sell the house in Enmore Park.’

‘But that is your home.’

‘No, it never was. It has always been my father’s home.’

Then he reached into his pocket and pulled out the engagement ring he had kept since that fateful day three months before when she had thrown it at him.

‘Just excuse me a minute,’ he said.

He hurried over to a man selling chestnuts and asked for a penny’s worth. While he was filling a bag, Thomas pulled out an old battered exercise book and, after a pause, threw it into the brazier. As he watched, the flames flared up round it.

The vendor looked up. ‘Oi, you can’t stick any old rubbish on those coals, could ruin the taste of the nuts. What you put on there?’

‘The past,’ said Thomas. With that he took the chestnuts back to Milly and proposed.